JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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by John Hess
Contingent facultyare non-tenure eligible college faculty with term appointments (one semester, two years, etc.) that are contingent on enrollment, funding and program change. This faculty has little or no job security and very low wages compared to their professorial counterpart. Since many of our readers are connected to colleges, this resource guide will be of special interest to them.

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Free market, branded imagination — Harry Potter and the commercialization of children's culture

by Jyotsna Kapur

At the screening of *Harry Potter i*n the student center at Southern Illinois University, May 2002...

...children bring their Harry Potter paraphernalia...

> I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic.
> ... *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*[1]

Just when it seemed that magic had become passé even in its last home, i.e., children's culture, along came J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. (Chris Columbus, 2001).[2] After all, children's mass culture in the late twentieth century had derived a great deal of merriment ridiculing the idea of magic as the old fashioned ingredient of nineteenth century children's tales. They were now simply too tame and, should we say, childish, for a generation that had cut its teeth on video games and marketing campaigns designed to address them as a niche market.

Now mainstream films made for general consumption, like *Toy Story* (1995) mocked the idea that stories of toys coming to life had to be imbued with mystery. When the toys came to life in this film they asked: "Are you from Mattel?" "Were you made in Hong Kong?" Or there are toothpaste commercials that deconstruct the tooth fairy by casting a man in drag as the tooth fairy. In a commercial for Disney Land and a Visa credit card, the child cajoles its parents to use the credit card, putting on an "innocent" face so as to win a

...Film launches become "events" designed to sell not only a movie, but toys, clothes, videos, record albums, computer games.

trip to Disney Land, which had earlier cast itself as a magical place.

In contrast, Harry Potter, an orphan who is left to the mercy of his upwardly mobile, suburban aunt, uncle and cousin finds out one day that he is a wizard. He also finds out that there is an entire world, a way of life with its own language and culture that lives by magic. This world coexists parallel to the world of the "muggles," the wizards' term for the "normal," routine bound, monotonous, magic less, everyday world. Did *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* then indicate a return of the utopian imagination in children's literature and film? Not quite. Instead, Harry Potter is an excellent lesson about the limits of fantasy. Here that fantasy is produced as a commodity, driven by an industry that continuously raises the stakes for a film's survival in terms of expected returns.

Each of the film's artifacts is up for sale, including its costumes such as the sorting hat and the magic cape, which cover these bed sheets made for children. Here the motif is the magic cape...

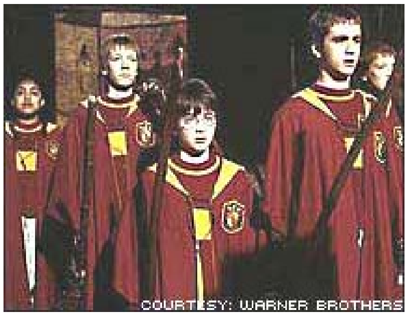
The film's aesthetics make obvious the limits of the utopian imagination. The way the film was scripted and how it looks stem from the "mugglish" political economic realities of the film business at the end of the twentieth century. Ultimately we must ask a question as old as capitalism itself: What is the nature of magic that the market serves to its consumers? The cornerstone of free market ideology, as espoused by Hollywood, rests on a notion that consumer demand and not production relations determine product. In other words, it is not the producers who shape the film but those who consume it. What kind of magic wand could create such a vision? To unravel this riddle, we need to trace the historical trajectory of the selling of Harry Potter, that is, the transformation it underwent from a book that was not written as a film-to-be into a franchise, a pretext for selling other market-produced commodities.

... and here the motif is the

In a rave review in *Variety*, Todd McCarthy reiterates the magic mantra that makes us responsible for the films we get:

sorting hat. Film productions now depend on easy recognizability that can be translated across a wide range of commodities. This process places bounds on the utopian imagination in children's culture.

One of the ways the Potter enterprise "muggles" steal fantasy is by glamorizing class. Only the elite can attend Hogwarts expensive boarding school. The teachers dress in capes and gown, are addressed as Professor, and sit at High Table.



Even children's uniforms are glamorized, as seen here in the school garb for aspiring witches and wizards.

> For tens of millions of fans the world over who have taken J.K. Rowling's marvelously imaginative novel (and its three sequels thus far) to their hearts, Warner Bros. smartly produced and elaborately manufactured $125 million-plus visualization will essentially make their dreams come true...[3]

McCarthy then goes on to enumerate the efforts made by the producers to give the audience exactly what it wanted. According to him the producers adhered as closely as possible to the text, hiring a director who would "obediently serve the material" without any danger of "idiosyncratic flights of fancy" that a more "high-powered and personal filmmaker (such as Steven Spielberg or Terry Gilliam)" would indulge in. The result in McCarthy's own assessment is a film that "never takes on a life or soul of its own" but that still "will have no bearing on how many times youngsters and even adults will return to this high flying entertainment that looks poised to become one of the biggest-grossing films of all time."
This review was published in *Variety*, a trade journal, but evaluating a film according to its box office returns has now also become a regular aspect of journalistic reviews. The phenomenon started in 1976, as Fredrick Wasser reports, with a small company called Entertainment Data, Inc (EDI) which started to report box office returns from participating theaters.[4] By the 1980s, EDI reports included about 80% of the nation's theaters. Quick, accurate reporting fed the growing trend in mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times* to report box office figures as a news item. That means that reviewers assume a critical review should consider costs and revenue. This discursive practice exemplifies writers' blurring of commerce and culture.

Children's film as a genre has led the commercializing of culture. It plays a central role in the construction of "consumption webs," such that media, including film, and other commodities constantly advertise each other. Film launches become "events" designed to sell not only a movie, but toys, clothes, videos, record albums, computer games. A film's release attracts so much attention

In the space made for girls in this fantasy, Hermione fits the stereotype of the smart girl who is an annoyance.

that one would have to live in another world to escape it. A glance at the most successful high-concept or event films in the last decade shows the overwhelming importance of the children's or family film in this category: *Home Alone* and *Ghost* (1990), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Titanic* (1997).

As Justin Wyatt has argued, since the high-concept film is a marketing concept, it is designed to maximize returns by eliminating ambiguity. Productions depend on easy recognizability that can be translated across a wide range of commodities. They get recognizability through dependence on stars or genre and by having scripts based on simple narratives with stock situations and simplification of character and plot.[5] Janet Wasko has characterized this phenomenon as "cultural synergy." Accordingly, in the preproduction stage, a film is conceived of as a *brand*. That is, companies promote their activities across a growing number of outlets. The activities and products related to a film can then be cross-promoted and distributed through media conglomerates across a range of media.[6]

Clearly this process places bounds on the utopian imagination in children's culture. Thus, exploring the production and marketing of Harry Potter will aid us in understanding how the role of the consumer is drastically confined within this cultural environment. In terms of film, this cultural environment in which films are scripted and promoted is dominated by centralized media ownership and the convergence of media culture and other forms of commodity culture.

Continued: Of movies and "Muggles"
—the political economy of the event film

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Of movies and “Muggles” — political economy and the event film

In many ways the basic logic of commercial filmmaking has remained the same, i.e., to minimize production costs and maximize profits. However, the nature of the business has changed because of media mergers in the late twentieth century and new technologies, such as television, VCR, and the Internet. Janet Staiger and Justin Wyatt have shown how ownership shifts in the industry have increased costs and, therefore, risks in the movies business.

According to Janet Staiger, the studio system has given way to the package unit system of film production. In the newer form of production, a producer organizes a film project, secures finance and combines the necessary workers (actors, director, music composer) and physical elements (screenplay, sets, cameras, costumes, lighting). Package unit production has increased economic risk because making film as a commercial venture does not have the safety cushion provided by studios in the past.[7] Moreover, since studios now function as distributors rather than producers, they are more likely to pick up projects with the minimum of risk.

Further, studios no longer exist as independent entities but are part of media conglomerates that have interests in television, the Internet, journalism, the recording industry, and cable. These media conglomerates seek balance among their various subsidiaries and thus seek projects that can cross over these various media and ancillary markets.

Wyatt has also highlighted media conglomerates’ dependence on market research, particularly of the quantitative and empirical kind, before

“Tie-ins” in *Harry Potter* — Media conglomerates employ marketing executives who come primarily from advertising. They rely on market research models developed for the sale of packaged goods and merchandise.

Fans wrote Rowling asking her not to let Coke use Potter. She wanted the contract but Coke responded to the pressure and did not use product placement in the film or depict Harry drinking Coke. If they did put Coke in the film, maybe the commercialized nature of the fantasy would have been easier to point out to kids.

See how a tie-in for a child’s toy is built into the structure and visual style of the film:

Aspiring wizards eye the broom in the shop window...

...The camera pans to reveal its brand name...

...Harry receives a birthday gift...

making decisions about which film projects to undertake. These marketing executives tend to come primarily from advertising. Thus they

Their reliance on quantifiable data makes it hard for them see the value in prospective undertakings that are more innovative, complex and emphasize the visual or aural (rather than narrative) aspects of cinema.

Producers now tend to look more favorably at script treatments for blockbusters. This preference for blockbusters derives from an innovation in distribution that began in the 70s with the initiation of “four walling,” a system ironically pioneered by a low budget film, *Billy Jack* (1971). Four walling depends on intensely promoting the film in all possible channels and saturating the market to create the highest possible public awareness in a film’s opening weekend. This includes leasing all the theaters in a particular region and extensively using TV advertising.

The logic is that if distributors can pack in audiences in the first week, they will reduce the risks of losing future audiences on account of poor word-of-mouth. As Dan Ackerman writes, this economic goal also depends on the fact that studios take 70% of their box-office receipts in the first week of a film’s release.[8] In succeeding weeks, the studio’s percentage is generally reduced to about 30%. Fredrick Wasser cites MPAA figures to show that while U.S. spending on advertising increased significantly in the years 1981-94 movie advertising grew at nearly twice the general advertising rate (167). Increased costs like this further diminish the economic risks that producers are willing to take.

According to studio estimates *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* set a box office record in the first three days of its release, earning $93.5 million in tickets (Dan Ackman). This surpassed the three-day record set in 1997 by *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* of $72.1 million. *Harry Potter*’s success derives from its marketing strategy and saturating theaters the first week of a film’s release. The movie opened in 3,672 theaters with 8,200 screens, about one out of every four screens in the U.S. Most theaters played *Harry*

...The children can't wait to open it...

...And, of course, the gift is none other than the Nimbus 2000.

Potter on more than one screen. In contrast *Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace* had played only on about 5000 screens in its opening weekend, for which it raked in $65 million (Dan Ackman).

Significantly Harry Potter had become a household name by the time of the film's release, giving distributors a major pre-sold component to rely on: the book. Time Warner optioned the book shortly after its British publication in 1997 but before it became a smash hit. Since then Harry Potter has been planned as a franchise. Subsequently, the literary sequels have had success, and the original novel continues to perform as number one on Amazon. At this point, it is hard to separate literary success from the marketing campaigns that surround the whole project. Publishers released the books, especially the sequels, with elaborate marketing campaigns designed as hide-and-go-seek games between consumers and book retailers.

For instance, the fourth book's release, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* relied on a highly publicized secret (an oxymoron) campaign. Publishing records were noisily broadcast: 3.8 million first copies were printed in the U.S. and a million more in Britain. Warehouses were bristling with security. Booksellers were forbidden from unpacking books before midnight while at the same time Amazon.com promised online buyers a Saturday delivery of the first 50,000 book orders. Even the business contract with the Fed Ex Corporation became part of the advertising campaign with the shipping company calling the order for the Harry Potter book the "largest single day distribution event in the history of business to consumer e-commerce."[9] Not to be outdone, Barnes and Noble's Internet site also promised Saturday delivery to orders placed before Friday 11 A.M. the preceding day.

Bookstores planned Harry Potter parties and other gimmicks to lure customers, including opening their doors at midnight. On the morning of the book's release, media lined up to interview those waiting to buy the books, with reporters and TV crews sometimes equaling or outnumbering the latter. The release also included photo opportunities for adults and children to pose in Harry Potter garb. This last promotional strategy continued with the release of the film. In Carbondale, Illinois, where I live, both children and adults could don Harry Potter costume and have their photos taken at the entrance of the theater.

The time in between the release of the fourth and fifth book saw two quick spinoffs of the book itself: Rowling's *Quidditch through the Ages* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Reviews on Amazon already claimed that these thin books, marketed to look like Hogwart's textbooks annotated with Harry's comments, would become collectors items. Written in the dull style of school textbooks, the two books' appeal can only be explained as a result of advertising. Promoters could now rely on self-selection of Harry Potter fans into a marketable subculture among. Among these fans, a history of Quidditch has become a lingua franca. However, Amazon.com's promote also indicates the widespread acknowledgement of the commodification of childhood nostalgia. That is, here children were encouraged to buy with a future collectible market in mind.

Besides the book, promotion relied on other aspects of commodity culture to prepare the audience for the film's release. Development and advertising campaigns for computer and video games were afoot in July 2000, almost sixteen months prior to the film's release. As Electronic Arts Inc. acquired the license to develop these games, it claimed in its publicity to be working closely with Christopher Columbus and J.K. Rowling. Previously in 1999 Electronic Arts had signed a five-year agreement with AOL to deliver online games and interactive entertainment for AOL's nineteen million users. The subsequent merger of AOL and Time Warner provided Electronic Arts a good opportunity to piggyback on Potter's name already in circulation.
The film accordingly gained widespread advertisement on the media subsidiaries held by AOL Time Warner, such as its television channels,

WB, Cartoon Network, and CNN. The conglomerate's magazines including *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *People* carried articles on the movie and on Rowling. Rowling's personal story, a single mom struggling on welfare when she wrote the book, is exactly the kind of rags to riches stories so favored by capitalism. *Time* magazine, including its children's section, carried articles on Harry Potter, including a cover story titled "Wild about Harry" way back in September 20, 1999, shortly after the book was optioned. Typical of other commercial children's films, *Harry Potter* found its way into other forms of children's commodity culture. Mattel has held the license for Harry Potter toys. It sells action figures ranging from $9.99 for the smaller plastic figures to $119 for the larger ones, such as, Harry Potter battling the mountain troll. Tiger Electronics, also under license, produced alarm clocks with talking portraits (inspired by the moving portraits in the film) and a book of spells. Other paraphernalia include a Harry Potter Trivia game, a board game, costumes, and puzzles. Scholastic Paperbacks, publishers of the Harry Potter series, has come out with Harry Potter journals, stationery kit, and even Hogwarts crests. By the time of the film's release, the marketing muggles had ensured that only those in a comatose state had not heard of Harry Potter.

Continued: Novella into film

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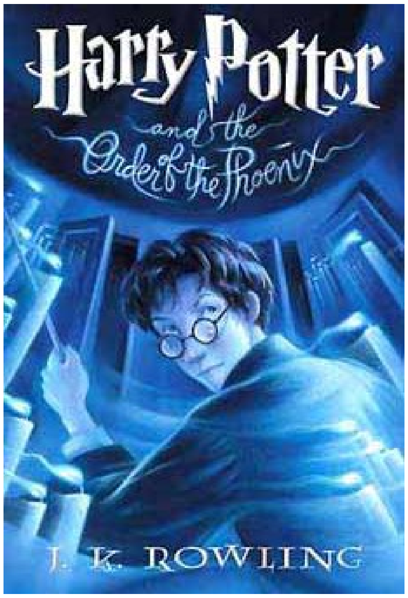
How the Muggles stole fantasy



Spring 2003, Amazon.com says, “But hurry for Harry. Order by June 17 to take advantage of this special order.

Todd McCarthy’s review in *Variety* , cited earlier, saw no relation between *Harry Potter*’s blockbuster character and what he considers a text that “lacks a soul.” This soul-lessness, or homogenization to be more accurate, is grounded in the political economic realities of branding, a further development of the idea of the high concept or event film. As Fredrick Wasser indicates, Barry Diller at ABC thought up the high concept idea. He demanded film projects that could be easily summarized in both an abbreviated 30-second television commercial and in a sentence synopsis for *TV Guide*.[10] Logically, this commercialized cultural form came out of television, since TV from its inception had to grab viewer attention in brief attention-stealing fragments in order to sell products.

At the core of branding strategy is the need for an easy summary. Any degree of complexity creates confusion and therefore difficulty in sustaining a brand image. As Naomi Klein explains, the success of a branding strategy, driven by synergy, depends upon repetition and visibility.[11] The correct way to imagine a brand, as Janet Wasko, has suggested, is to think of it as the hub of a wheel; it branches out into various products all designed to repeat the brand image. Harry Potter as a gay icon, for example, would be problematic since it would introduce conflicts. But reducing magic to a series of special effects is entirely compatible with today’s marketing strategy, aimed towards reducing any complexity.[12] The whole film built around a branding strategy, therefore, will have the textual complexity of a commercial or a movie trailer.

Game Boy’s Harry Potter. Computerandvideogames.com says of it, “Ooh, if you thought Harry Potter look good on GBC, you'll shoot joyous bolts of lightening from your wand

In fact, as in commercials one, of the most exciting human activities *Harry Potter* presents when you see him on Game Boy Advance."

Game Boy, like the film, limits magic to mechanized special effects. There is no room for fundamentally changing the status quo.

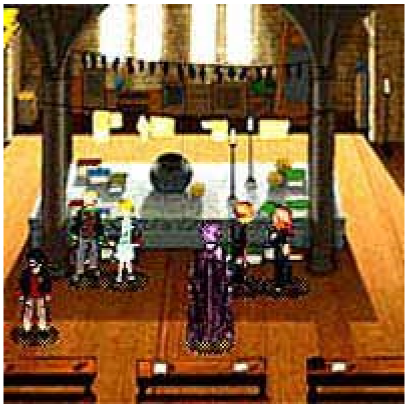
Game Boy works out a theme of Potter lost in the school. It is a potentially good theme for children, being lost in an overwhelming environment, but here getting lost becomes a puzzle that has to be resolved and the narrative does not deepen the experience for kids.

is shopping. Aspiring wizards and witches press their noses into a show window, eyeing with longing the latest branded broomstick, Nimbus 2000, on display. Accompanied by a sigh from desiring children, the camera pans in the style of TV commercials to reveal the broomstick's brand name in the show window, and it does the same kind of pan later when Harry receives the broomstick as a gift for Christmas. Like other children's candy on store shelves today, Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans comes in a "variety of disgusting flavors" and like the promotional toys that make children eat at McDonalds, chocolate frogs in the wizard world are bought to get the holographic cards they come with.

How the utopian imagination in fantasy gets tamed when it is produced for mass marketing is most obvious in how the book was transformed into a franchise. Frederic Jameson has argued that narratives covertly contain repressed desires of the political unconscious. That is, narratives bear traces of class struggle and the desire to "move from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom.[13] Rowling's first *Harry Potter* book develops a parody of the privatized bourgeois family wrapped up in consumer culture. But the book's critical element is totally pulled out of the film. I am not suggesting that the entire book offered an unmitigated critique of consumer society. Rather, it had some critical elements elided by the simplistic film script.

The book developed its magical element, the aspect so appealing to its readers, by setting up a contrast between the wizards's magic world and the privatized, routinized life of the Dursleys, the muggles. The film quickly and efficiently dismisses Harry's stay with the Dursleys as a poor stepchild. In contrast, Rowling's account dwells on the contrast between Harry and Dursley's pampered and greedy son, Dudley. Rowling describes Mr. Dursley as a "large beefy man with hardly any neck" who is the director of a big firm that makes drills. His wife, thin and blond,

> had the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors.(1)



Game Boy reduces magic to its barest minimum, usually spectacular tricks pulling things out of thin air. It remains illusionist and follows the rules of cinematic realism. In fact, both film animation and computer generated imagery have the potential to break those laws of physics and thus imagine other worlds as possible.

As extensively treated in the novel, the family is marked by an intense desire to be "normal," fearful of any diversity, and obsessed with maintaining their own "business", which for Mrs. Dursely is keeping her home and for Mr. Dursley, selling drills. The Dursleys' biggest fear is that their neighbors would come to know that Mrs. Dursley's sister, Harry's mother, was a witch. That information if it got around would make them stand out in a typical suburban neighborhood whose neat rows of houses have nothing out of place.

In Rowling's text the "normalcy" that the Dursleys desire is the exact opposite of imagination. In writing of Mr. Dursley's plight upon encountering the wizards on the streets, including being hugged by a complete stranger, Rowling writes,

> He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination (5).

The Dursleys spend all their energies on their son Dudley, lavishing him with gifts. On Dudley's birthday such gifts include a racing bike, a video camera, a remote control, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR. Moreover, they are all wrapped! To exaggerate the social satire, Dudley, the consumer, assigns value to commodities based on their market price rather than valuing them as gifts from his parents. When Dudley objects that he just got thirty six presents, one short of what he got last year Mr. Dursley responds,

> Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father (22).

Dudley., a bully and always greedy for more is seen "kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets.(13)" In fact, the book can be read like a modern day socializing tale from a mother to a child, warning of the impossibility of finding happiness in market-produced commodities. By painting a picture of the consuming child as whiny, fat, and unlikable, Rowling caricatures the child consumer as a spoiled brat who has lost all imagination.

The film sidesteps Rowling's social satire about the privatized bourgeois family by making Hogwarts, the wizard school, the story's center. What the script then sells through Hogwarts is *Englishness*. This trait of Englishness is evoked in the film as a class symbol, following a tradition in children's literature, particularly in North America and India. No alternative school, Hogwarts is in every way constructed to uphold the elitism of the British private school where the usual stereotypes of race and gender prevail. The power of money stays intact in the school.

Before the children can enter this elite institution, as befitting their class backgrounds, their families have to put out a rather large sum of money for their children acquire books, uniforms and supplies, in this case wands. Harry Potter's parents leave him a locker filled with gold, and he shares his wealth with Ron Weasley, one of five children whom everyone in the school understands to be poor. Teachers at the school are authoritative, and relations among students marked by hierarchy and competition. The children are in awe and fear of Albus Dumbledore, Prof. McGonagall, and Snape, all of whom are referred to as professors, wear cloaks when teaching, and sit at the high table.

The choice of locations and stars rely on selling *Englishness* as a commodity. A twelfth century castle, Alnwick on the Scottish border was cast as Hogwarts. A tenth century Anglican cathedral located in Gloucestershire was used as the entrance to Gryffindor Hall, Harry's dormitory. And the elaborate banquet scenes were staged on a sound set made to replicate the dining hall of Oxford University's largest college. In this era of spinoffs, British Tourist Authority has issued a *Harry Potter* movie map (available at www.travelbritain.com) detailing sites open to visitors. The 150 year old London Rail station has been marked with signs such as "No spells on platforms," Owls must be caged at all times," and "No Broom Parking" to direct visitors to platform

"9 and 3/4."

The special effects, location or casting is not an integral part of the narrative. In this highly commercial film these visual aspects are the narrative itself. The plot is little more than a series of events strung together like movie trailers. From the quidditch match to adventures with the troll to the final confrontation with Voldemort, the narrative at best offers a mystery story. It has no mythic qualities of transformation.

The mise en scene tries so hard to render magic in the most realistic way possible that it plays no role in developing or revealing the inner states of the film's characters and becomes an end in itself. This literal rendering of magic trivializes fantasy. It reduces fantasy to spectacles that look like video games. For instance, at Hogwarts school, pictures talk, ghosts roam freely, and staircases move by themselves. While these features may simply exist within a wizards' school, these phenomena can also express children's anxieties.

For example, a narrative could express children's fears about finding their way around in the overpowering environs of institutions where traditions seem to have a life of their own, where elite schools are founded upon making the child feel small enough to want to conform. However, by presenting these phenomena simply as aspects of the school and not a children's perceptions, the film turns the ghostly details into mechanical devices that a child seemingly can master, not unlike elevators or doors that children must learn to traverse. The film's fetishization of technology comes to stand in for its absence of content. Such vacuousness was amply seen in the film's self promotion. David Heyman boasted in the September 20th, 1999 issue of *Time* that the primary costs of the film would be in the special effects:

> We want to make all of that as believable and fantastical as possible. Technology is now incredible.

In terms of race and gender the status quo remains ideologically intact, even in this magical school. The darker characters arouse suspicion. Snape and Quirrell are both darker while Quirrell even sports a turban. While in the book an Indian girl, Parvati Patel, goes to the wizards' school, the film's only noticeable student of color is the young commentator during the Quidditch match. The wise and ancient centaur, half man, half horse is cast distinctly as a black man. The gringotts who guard the bank are barely disguised Jewish stereotypes. Hermione Granger, Harry and Ron's girl pal, is presented as irritatingly smart and well read.

The trivialization of fantasy most blatantly permeates the moments in which the narrative succeeds in sentimentalizing the notion of love. In the book, Harry learns through his life-threatening struggle with Voldemort that his mother had died trying to save his life. When a life is touched by a love like that it is indestructible. While Voldemort could now only leave a mark on Harry's forehead, with his bare hands Harry could turn to ash Quirrell's body, now occupied by Voldemort. This is a powerful fantasy of mythic proportions. But the film brings that image of power to the ground.

Apparently, the lessons the children learn in the book about friendship, intelligence, and love are not enough in themselves for the film version. Most important for the film's closure is the victory gaining the house cup. The film ends with the school principal, Albus Dumbledore, announcing Harry's house's victory, setting the stage for a sequel. The ending also makes it clear that the film series will be a set of stories about a British boarding school and not a fantasy about another world.

Continued: Fan culture

Fan culture

In their fan art, fans interpret Harry Potter in many different ways. Here, two examples of fan art suggest a sexualized version of Harry Potter that does not fit with the film as “family” entertainment.[16]

How then are we to understand the enthusiasm that the film generated as a “magical” phenomenon that both adults and children were flocking to pay money to see? Part of the answer lies in the film’s marketing and self-promotion as fantasy. The other part lies in our desire to see magic, particularly in children’s culture. The film attracted crowds in the first days of its release as a result of two years of marketing. Also the events of September 11th and the Afghanistan war made fantasy desirable perhaps as a way to forget and forget but also to find hope.

The film also provided a venue for parents and children to come together and share a cultural experience. There was generally an atmosphere of happy expectation around the film screenings making the film into more of a family event or a collective experience. The photo opportunities outside the cinema contributed to this sense of the film as a community event.

Large numbers of the audience, both children and adults, knew the book before going to the movie. Thus, watching the film became an active exercise as they compared the film to the book or in the very least, followed the book through the course of the film. In our highly industrialized culture, this foreknowledge approximates folklore in that we bring to these mass produced stories our own versions and interact actively with them. Children spoke back at the film, predicting its narrative, and staying around to discuss the film.

Despite the film’s limited imagination about Hogwarts as a private British elite school, the children I talked to had a more active understanding of it. They discussed it as a place which had different adult “muggles” from the teachers and administrators they encountered in their own schools. Hogwarts presents an appealing possibility of growing up with other children, living a life of

Deliberately ambiguous, this fan art image invites us to interpret the situation. It does not tame fantasy. This encouraging of imaginative freedom is one reason to abandon realism as a goal of film animation.

In June, 2003, when the new Harry Potter book was released, the story made national news....

In Oak Park, a large middle class Chicago suburb, Borders sponsored a day of parties, events, and readings....

learning and curiosity with adults who are wise and filled with character and magic tricks up their sleeves.

Children did not entirely "buy into" the film, especially its selling of Harry Potter as a commodity, but they inserted themselves into the story imaginatively. For that reason, shelves filled with Harry Potter merchandise had to be cleared out. There are only so many Harry Potter objects a child would want to buy. Moreover, commodified fantasy is short lived. Differentiated only by look and style, it fosters repetitive and minimal content, easily replaced by another more spectacular object whose release is based on the planned obsolescence of the former. Just two months after the film's release, the shelves in the local Wal-Mart and Barnes and Nobles had been cleared of any Harry Potter merchandise. What remained had been dumped on the clearance shelves. The film had come and gone with video release planned for May and a sequel the following year. How can the audience be responsible for what it sees, when even its ability to watch is constrained by marketing strategies?

Even more revealing of the restrictions on mass marketed fantasy was the bitter battle launched by AOL-Warner against fan websites. AOL Warner issued letters of warning to Harry Potter fans, most of them teens and preteens, asking them to stop using the Harry Potter name. The first such letter was sent in December 2000 to fifteen-year old, Claire Field, asking her to take the domain name HarryPotterGuide.co.uk off her site. That letter ended with the threat:

> If we do not hear from you by 15 December 2000 we shall put this matter directly into the hands of our solicitors.[14]

In response fans set up sites with wonderfully appropriate names like www.potterwar.org.uk. Other fans similarly threatened by Warner Brothers contacted them. These included, Catherine Chang, a fifteen years old from Singapore who had already relinquished rights to her domain name, www.thehpn.com ; Sung Yoo, a twelve years old who was threatened for his site www.HarryPotterFAQ.com; and thirteen year olds Ross McCaw and Peter Walker, regarding their site, www.HarryPotter-world.com.

Another site held by the Defense Against the Dark Arts (DADA) www.dprohpet.com/dada/ called for a boycott of Potter merchandize except for the books. They demanded that Warner Brothers pay reparations by making substantial donations to UNICEF and giving premiere tickets to fans they had threatened, in order to really, "show how sorry they feel." In the face of the bad publicity Warner Brothers withdrew their threats of lawsuits in March 2001. Nevertheless, the battle with corporate control over ideas is not yet won. As www.potterwar.org.uk summarized the withdrawal of legal action against fans is not a victory but victor(-ish). Warner Brothers did not return the domains they had taken. More importantly, Harry Potter policing and resistance is only one battle in what promise to be a continuous war between corporations and fans.

The battle over Harry Potter's name clearly indicates the limits of fantasy when branded by media corporations. Just as branding was originally a practice where owners stamped cows with their names to mark them as private property, corporations are now engaged in claiming our imaginations. If it were true that we get the films we want, then why this contest over how we interpret these films? That the battle over our imaginations is not yet won is clear by the contradictory relations media corporations have with fans. On the one hand, fans do these corporations' work, buying their products and thus creating profits. On the other hand, when fans begin to create alternatives, they threaten the iron grip these corporations seek to retain over their brands. The true nature of the relation between media corporations and audiences in revealed when the former's control is threatened. Then no longer posing as democrats who make what audiences want, these corporations transform into powerful policing agents.

In their letter to fans Warner Brothers stated:

> We are concerned that your domain name registration is likely to cause consumer confusion and dilution of the intellectual property rights.[15]

Fantasy, in this view, clearly had one and only one purpose, its translation into consumer behavior. The

Books were warehoused until a specific time of release....

... all across the United States.

Young fans and their parents stood in long lines...

... and dressed in Potter garb for the event...

Defense Against the Dark Arts quite aptly characterized the threat this kind of marketing poses to our imagination:

> There are dark forces afoot, darker even than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, because these dark forces are daring to take away something so basic, so human, that it's close to murder. They are taking away our freedom of speech, our freedom to express our thoughts, feelings and ideas, and they are taking away the fun of a magical book.
> www.dprophet.com/dada/manifesto.html

... Here a young fellow dressed as Harry makes the nightly news...

In attempting to colonize children's imaginations corporations reveal a fundamental truth about capitalism: They will leave no aspect of human life unturned in the search for profits. Ordinary people's desire to find magic in children's culture, which got us into theaters in the first place, speaks of our need to find an alternative, even utopian imagination. That we think we would find it in children's culture speaks of a lingering social conception that childhood is distinctly different from adulthood. We hope that from the site of childhood, we can critique the inequities and injustices of this world and imagine a different one. However, aggressive marketing to children to bring them into the market as consumers blurs that boundary.

... Inside were parties and readings, here in an upscale bookstore....

AOL-Warner Brothers' battle with fans reveals that victory over the human imagination is not easily won. Bringing children into the market as consumers can also politicize them against the market. We, parents and older friends, can either wring our hands at how corporations have taken our children's socialization away from us, turning us into facilitators who must buy market produced commodities to keep our kids momentarily from adulthood. But in the long run, they will turn into adults who experience the anxiety, addiction, low self-esteem, and isolation so familiar to us from being consumers.

Or we can collaborate with our children in resisting the branding of our imaginations. We can collaborate with them to reject the most fantastic market-produced myth of all: That is the myth of choice, that it is we who determine the products we get in the market.

... and here in a more modest bookstore, an employee dressed as a wizard does a few tricks.

Continued: Notes

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Notes

[1] J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastics Press. First American edition. 1998) p. 67

[2] I wish to thank my daughter Suhaila and her fifth grade class for discussions about Harry Potter and dedicate this paper to their teacher Michelle Kornreich who continues to teach them that critical thinking is immensely pleasurable. Thanks are also due to Nilim for showing me the "muggles" in our own neighborhood, to Sudesh Balan for help with the images, and to Mike Covell for reading the paper with his Harry Potter glasses on.

[3] Todd McCarthy. "Wizard of Awes will Conjure Gigantic B.B." *Variety*, November 12-18, 2001. p. 27.

[4] Fredrick Wasser. *Veni, Vidi, Video* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Austin Press. 1998) p. 168

[5] Justin Wyatt. *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Austin Press. 1994)

[6] Janet Wasko. "The Magical-Market of Disney." *Monthly Review*. Vol 52, No 11. pp. 56-71.

[7] Janet Staiger. "The Package-Unit System: Unit Management after 1955." David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kirsten Thompson (eds.) *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press. 1985)

[8] Dan Ackman, "Harry Potter is a Fraud," www.forbes.com/2001/11/19/1119topnews.html

[9] "Harry Potter and the Wacky Web," ZDNET News, July 6, 2000, 5 PM PT.

[10] Fredrick Wasser. *Veni Vidi Video*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Austin Press. 1998)

[11] Naomi Klein. *No Logo* (Toronto, Canada: Vintage. 2000)

[12] A Google search with “HarryPotter/” turns up adult fan sites interpreting Harry Potter as a gay icon.

[13] Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1981)

[14] See <web.ukonline.co.uk/bringers/temp/c-potter.html#news>

[15] An excellent article by Mutch Albom, *Jewish World Review*, March 5, 2001/10 Adar, 5761. Available on www.jewishworldreview.com/0301/albom030501.asp

[16] See this fan site at http://www.geocities.com/kelly_michelle_fox/hpfanart.html

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Goblin's dilemma in Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* and *Spider-Man*

by Boyd White and Tim Kreider

1. *A Simple Plan*'s internal framing conveys increasing isolation and entrapment.

Hank and Sarah have married bliss, with her as madonna.

When Hank forces his way into the plane, we see his face through a mesh....

Sam Raimi has always pulled for the working stiff. In his *Evil Dead* trilogy (1982-1993), he transformed Bruce Campbell's Ash Williams from a clerk at a K-Mart knock-off into a crusader protecting civilization from the forces of darkness, despite the best efforts of the devil and his boss. Like many artists who spend their lives working in supposedly lowbrow forms such as crime novels and superhero sagas, Raimi knows how the conventions of genre provide a perfect palette for depicting social ills in broad strokes. Cornerstones of the *roman noir* such as James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) or important comics like Denny O'Neill and Neal Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (1970-1972) often struck at the heart of the most pressing issues of their times—poverty, class warfare, corporate corruption, racism.

At the same time, they never sacrificed what kept readers coming back to the drugstore racks for the next hardboiled original or four-color extravaganza. Readers wanted fast-paced stories and gripping plots filled with hardened drifters drinking themselves straight to their graves, lovesick blondes spilling out of their cheap cocktail dresses, Technicolor villains scheming the end of the world, or steel-jawed men in tights beating the crap out of each other. Two of Raimi's latest films, *A Simple Plan* (1998) and *Spider-Man* (2002), do the same thing. These two films are very different on the surface, one a low-budget, arthouse, crime film and the other a blockbuster superhero flick, but they both succeed both cinematically, full of action and suspense that keep our eyes onscreen, and morally, reflecting the grim choices in life that everyday working folk have to

...duplicating the shot of the fox breaking through chicken wire into the hen house.

The money comes between Hank and Sarah.

The comfortable space they think they're securing is small and lonely, surrounded by emptiness.

The money burns in the hearth, as the enraged Sarah looks on.

confront.

A Simple Plan is a low budget, character driven drama, *Spider-Man* a record breaking, CGI extravaganza. Together the two are surprisingly subversive. They address the ruthless selfishness that's made our society, especially its poorer segment, into a war of every man for himself, and they focus on the effect of that ruthlessness, and perhaps also a cause of it, in that most sacrosanct of institutions, the family. Both films' central characters are confronted in the starkest terms with the same hard choice between doing what they think is best for their loved ones and doing what they know is right. In *A Simple Plan* Hank Mitchell and in *Spider-Man* Peter Parker, a couple of working class guys, are tempted by the sudden possibility of riches. Hank discovers by chance a bag full of kidnap ransom, and Peter gains superhuman powers that seem to promise limitless wealth and fame. In *A Simple Plan* Hank feels forced into an amoral course of action by the responsibility of his own new fatherhood (and by the example of his own failed father). In more cartoonish fashion, in *Spider-Man* Peter has the same dilemma foisted on him by a grotesque, demonic father figure.

And both films' main characters learn, through loss and grief, that by trying to protect and enrich their own at everyone else's expense, they lose everything. Hank is a human character we can identify with, decent but corruptible. In *A Simple Plan*, he makes the same kinds of choices most of us have had to make offscreen. He turns on his neighbor and compromises himself to ensure a better future for his family, only to see everything that was good in his life irredeemably sullied and lost. In *Spider-Man* Peter, a hero in a comic-book fable, learns from his loss before it's too late. He sees that the choice offered is a false one and refuses to make it.

Continued: The American dream

Hank returns to a dead end job and loveless marriage.

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A Simple Plan

2. The plan in *A Simple Plan*

The men find money in the downed plane.

Hank agrees to the plan only if he can keep the money hidden till it's safe to spend it.

Jacob Mitchell, Hank's brother,

The betrayals that propel *A Simple Plan* forward to its heartbreaking conclusion are at least as old as Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*. In Raimi's shrewd updating, two brothers and a friend find in a downed kidnapper's airplane in the New Hampshire woods a gym bag containing over four million dollars. The crucial difference between the old and new versions of the story lies in their respective morals. As Chaucer's Pardoner states, the main point of his tale is "Radix malorum ex Cupiditas" ("The love of money is the root of all evil"). Greed, however, is not the prime mover in Raimi's stark crime drama. Two of the conspirators, Jacob Mitchell and Lou Chambers, are motivated not by avarice but by desperation. Unemployed and on welfare, both of these guys just want to pay off their debts and earn a little respect. Only the hero, Hank Mitchell, with whom we're supposed to identify, actually commits a murder. He's also the only one whose motives are truly corrupt since he kills his neighbors just to advance his family's middle class lifestyle.

As an introduction to the film's three main characters, the first twenty minutes of *A Simple Plan* establishes basic tensions between middle and lower classes. In the film's opening shots, we see Hank Mitchell, accountant for the local feed store, walking home through town after getting off work early to be with his wife. Townspeople and the local sheriff smile and wave to him against a backdrop of Christmas decorations still clinging to lampposts and stoplights. When he gets home, he races up the stairs to kneel in awe before his pregnant wife's body. It's the kind of sequence we've seen a thousand times since Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey first ran through town in *It's a Wonderful Life*. On the surface, at least, Hank's dependable and honest, a regular Joe. As his wife Sarah later tells him, when he's convinced all his crimes will come to light, kills a farmer on a snowmobile getting too near the spot.

Jacob's horror at what he's done.

Hank is dragging the farmer's body away when the farmer comes to. Hank strangles him but....

....has to avert his eyes as he commits his first murder.

> You've got to remember how people see you. You're just a normal guy, a nice sweet normal guy. No one would ever believe that you were capable of doing what you've done.

Not so with Hank's brother, Jacob Mitchell, and Jacob's low rent Rabelaisian buddy Lou Chambers. Before we even see them pull up in Jacob's beatup Chevy pickup, their arrival is announced by music echoing loudly from their truck, the opening guitar riffs from Norman Greenbaum's hippie Jesus anthem "Spirit in the Sky." Even Hank and his wife can hear the song from their second-story bedroom. As Jacob rings his brother's doorbell, Lou moons him from the truck, and Jacob flips him the bird in return. The next few scenes reinforce this initial impression of Jacob and Lou as stereotypical drunken rednecks. In the cemetery where Hank and Jacob are visiting their father's grave, Lou starts pissing his name into the snow and Jacob runs to join him. Later, the two buddies guzzle beers and tell dirty jokes in the truck while driving down a backcountry road, with Hank sandwiched uncomfortably between them.

Part of what makes these contrasts so convincing is Raimi's astute depiction of the mutual contempt between middle and lower classes. As a college educated man with a respectable job, Hank can't help but look down on Jacob and Lou. When Jacob tells Hank the brother needs to shovel his snow, Hank jokes, "I'll pay you a quarter to do it." The dialogue suggests that Hank unconsciously views his brother as a simple-minded laborer, as a tool Hank can use at will. Lou's distaste for Hank is equally evident. He calls Hank "Mr. Accountant," takes offense at his refusal to share an early beer with him and Jacob, and sneers at his educated diction. Jacob joins in mocking his brother's middle class pretensions, imitating Hank's effeminate, mincing run and calling his shoes "pussy loafers." Later, when the three members of the conspiracy start to turn against each other, their class antagonism becomes more brutally explicit. Jacob says of his brother to Lou:

> We don't have anything in common, me and him. You're more like a brother to me than he is.

Jacob knows that underneath Hank's ingratiating appeals to family ties and his bribe to help Jacob buy back the family farm, the more well to do brother doesn't consider the working class on an equal. At one point Jacob says to Lou, "Look how he's looking at us, like he's fucking better," and then he turns to Hank and says, "Like you own us or something."

Lou Chambers, Jacob's buddy, comes to Hank desperate for cash to pay off his debts.

About a third of the way through the story, Hank takes possession of the four million dollars, so in effect he also secures blackmail power over the other two. At this point, Hank's ownership of the two men becomes more literal. Their wary alliance collapses amid mutual threats to turn each other in. Hank challenges Lou:

> Let's just think about this. If you and I both go into Carl's office tomorrow, and we both claim the other one killed Dwight Stephenson, who do you think he's going to believe? You? The forty year old unemployed high school dropout who's proud when people call him the town drunk? Or me? I've got a job. I don't get drunk and scream obscenities at my wife in public. I don't pass out in other people's doorways. I wonder who he's going to believe?

Sarah nurses her newborn as she conspires to frame Lou for murder.

Hank knows that even though he's the only murderer in the room, his class status gives him the advantage. He's cynically banking on our culture's automatic association of wealth with respectability and poverty with moral turpitude.

In Lou's home, setting up the frame...

The American dream

Raimi depicts each character's reason for wanting the money. In doing so, he exposes not only the desperation of the lower class' struggle to survive but also the ruthlessness that underlies the middle class's desire to protect and advance its precarious status and lifestyle. Of the three men, Lou's needs are the most pressing and elemental. He comes to Hank's house in the middle of the night to ask for his share of the stolen money. Dropping his tough guy act, he nearly collapses against Hank's front door as he swallows his pride:

Jacob hesitates: “It ain't right.”

> I need my share, Hank. I do. I’m broke. *And I owe people money*. I need some help here.

In the scene in which the Mitchell brothers later betray Lou, he holds a gun on Hank but shouts to Jacob,

> You know I need that money. I need it tomorrow. They’re going to take my truck.

Hank ends up killing both Lou...

These are not the words of a greedy man dreaming of a summer home in the Berkshires. Lou is clinging to the most necessary of his everyday possessions. The most extravagant dream he expresses is that Jacob should use his share of the loot to buy “something classy—a Trans Am.” By society’s standards, Lou’s dreams are embarrassingly small.

...and Lou’s wife.

Jacob’s dreams are even more painfully ordinary. All he wants is to live a normal life with a wife and a family, things even Lou has. Never having had money, a decent job, a college education, or even a girlfriend, Jacob sees romance and normalcy as commodities that can be acquired only if a person has enough money. In one of *A Simple Plan’s* most moving scenes, Jacob and Hank sit outside Lou’s home after Lou has been killed. The two brothers discuss Jacob’s dreams for an ordinary life. Having admitted that his only high school relationship was the result of a hundred dollar bet, Jacob says,

> God, Hank, you know, I’ve never even kissed a girl before. If being rich will change that, I’m all for it... I just want to know what people do, you know?

Hank tries to console his brother who is in a state of

Money itself holds no allure for him. All Jacob wants is a life that will allow him to be just like everyone else and give him the kind of respect everyone accords Hank. Hank can only nod and manage a tight smile. More socially integrated, he realizes how hopelessly far outside our culture’s margins Jacob’s life has been and always will be.

remorse over the Chambers.

Jacob asks Hank, “Do you feel evil.”

The sheriff seems wise to Hank and tells him an FBI agent (really a criminal) is looking for the downed plane. A stuffed fox is framed between the two.

Sarah’s furious reaction when Hank wants to return the money strips middle class values bare of any pretense of decency.

Of the three, only Hank is motivated by anything other than need. Already taking for granted the security and comfort that Lou and Jacob can only dream of, Hank’s role in the theft leads to the subsequent murders. His increasing ruthlessness comes from his desire to have his family’s life be the best that it can be, no matter what the cost. Throughout *A Simple Plan*, Raimi uses Hank’s moral deterioration to strip away any notions we have about supposed middle class respectability. When he, Jacob, and Lou first find the money, Hank’s the only one who wants to turn it in. He lectures the other two:

> You have to work for the American Dream. You don’t steal it.

Hank has internalized the laws and behavior that society has established for a proper husband and father. Violating those boundaries only becomes thinkable for him once Lou brings up the motive of Hank’s acting for his family:

> You got a beautiful wife at home. You’re about to have a baby. I know you ain’t pulling down that much at the feed mill.

Lou may be right, but all the images we see of the Mitchells’ lifestyle indicate that they are far from poor or desperate. Hank and Sarah’s house is immaculate, their furniture tasteful, and their clothes are stylish. They have wine with dinner. We never see them fretting over bills or about where their next meal is coming from. Every shot in the interior of their home is bathed in the soft yellow light of comfort and warmth. As Sarah herself first protests,

> We don’t have to worry about money now. You have a good job.

Hank has internalized one of capitalist culture’s most insidious messages about the sanctity of home and family: Protect your own and to hell with everyone else. Once he agrees to keep the money, all Hank can focus on is how it will guarantee his family financial security and free him from the pressures of being the breadwinner. Unlike Lou or Jacob, neither Hank nor his family really needs anything. Underneath his aw-shucks demeanor and everyman charm, he’s a greedy, selfish bastard. Lou alone recognizes this aspect of Hank's character. In the moment in the film after the Mitchell brothers have betrayed him and he holds Hank at gunpoint, Lou pleads with Jacob to take his side:

> You see, he's got a job. It's you and me, buddy, we are the ones who needs it [the money]. He just *wants* it. Do you think he's your friend? He doesn't give a fuck about you!

The murders and betrayals that Hank commits aren't motivated by financial need but in a twisted way by what he sees as his responsibility to his family. He smothers Dwight Stephenson to protect his brother and then rationalizes framing Lou for Dwight's murder after Lou threatened to turn him. He says he's doing this out of responsibility towards his wife and child. Then when Jacob assures him that Lou would never really turn him in, Hank replies,

> I can't take that chance. Not now with the baby.

Hank's moral decline is also commented on throughout the film by framing and visual style. His true nature is slyly hinted at by visual metaphors linking him to the thieving fox that led them to discover the cash. Early on, when Hank first forces his way into the downed plane, we see his face through a heavy wire mesh, duplicating the earlier shot of the fox poking his snout through chicken wire to break into the henhouse. Later, when the sheriff stops in at the barbershop where Hank's getting a haircut to ask him to come by and answer some questions from an FBI agent, we see a stuffed fox on the windowsill between the two men, an image of the hunted thief caught.

Like Hank, his wife Sarah Mitchell undergoes a radical transformation once she agrees to Hank's plan for keeping the money. Raimi uses such character change to stress how our most treasured myths about family and home inspire the kind of ruthless violence we see in *A Simple Plan*. In the scene that introduces her, Sarah is naked except for an open white bathrobe. Her figure is bathed in soft backlight from a window in the bathroom, a shot emphasizing her protruding pregnant belly,

The criminal posing as an FBI man says to Hank, "But you're not the cold blooded type, are you, Mr. Mitchell?"

With two murders at the plane site, Jacob insists his brother kill him and pin the murder on him, since the married man with a child seems to have so much to live for.

Hank with dead brother, sheriff, and criminal, living out the American Dream, which...

...goes up in flames.

The film ends with a view of the old family farm that Jacob wanted to use the money to restore.

making her the embodiment of Motherhood. Like the Capraesque scenes that first establish Hank's character, everything here presents Sarah as innocent and angelic. She's a Madonna, not a whore. But as she and Hank lie in bed the night after he brings home the money, she voices the same worry he has about not being able to trust Jacob and Lou. Her initial reluctance to keep the money has vanished

As the film progresses, Sarah becomes the true brains behind all Hank's plans. In one of the film's most telling scenes, even as she's nursing her newborn daughter in the maternity ward, Sarah herself devises the scheme to audiotape Lou and frame him for Dwight's murder. She holds her baby to her breast while her voice and stare become frozen. With icy calculation, she instructs Hank how to fuck over Lou. The implications of the moment are clear: Sarah's found this new reserve of ruthlessness not in spite of her motherhood but because of it. No animal is as vicious as a mother protecting her young.

Continued: The selfish family

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3. *A Simple Plan*'s critique of the American Dream

Hank and Sarah seem to be happy with their simple jobs and....

....the respect of their small town neighbors and...

The selfish family

Raimi's criticism of the U.S. family's selfishness is underscored by the settings in which he has Sarah and Hank plot against Lou and Jacob or manufacture new rationales for not turning in the money or themselves. Traditional husband and wife occasions such as fixing dinner, talking in bed, changing a diaper, or decorating the nursery serve as the homey context for current family discussions about betrayals, framings, and coverups. Conspicuously, all these cozy scenes are shot from an unconventional distance, emphasizing the darkened dining room, empty chairs, or bare corridors in the foreground. These interiors become cold spaces that confine the characters as much as the engulfing snow outside.

This recurring composition checks automatic viewer identification with the couple. The visual style effectively establishes an uncomfortable distance that invites us to consider the Mitchells' behavior with clinical detachment as a case study, like an experiment with too many rats and one piece of cheese. This technique also visually isolates Hank and Sarah inside the frame of an alcove or doorway. It confines them and suggests that the comfortable space they think they're securing for themselves with this money is terribly small and lonely, surrounded by emptiness. It's the condition they'll be left in at the film's end. Then there is just the two of them, trapped together for life with their gnawing discontent and the knowledge of their sins, bereft of family or friends.

The very presence of the stolen money in their home destroys any happiness the Mitchells ever had as they come to view their old life as inadequate and mean. The level of material comfort they were first satisfied with is no longer enough. When Hank decides to turn the money over to the local authorities because a supposed

...a small frame house.

After Sarah originally objects to keeping the money, the couple make big plans about how they will spend it.

Jacob brings a present for the new baby but does not go in to see Sarah. She is disgusted by the gift, his beloved childhood teddy bear. When Jacob asks Hank to shoot him at the end, his last request is, "You just tell that little girl that bear was from me.

FBI agent has arrived in town looking for the plane, Sarah stops him at the bottom of the stairs and blocks his way out the front door. As manipulative and emasculating as anything with which Lady Macbeth tortures her guilt ridden husband, Sarah's speech to Hank strips middle class values bare of any pretense of decency:

> Is that what you think you want? Walking up to the feed store every morning for the next thirty years waiting for Tom Butler to retire or die so you can finally get a raise? And what about Amanda? Do you think she's going to like growing up in somebody else's hand-me-down clothes? Playing with some kid's old toys because we can never afford to buy her anything new? And me? What about me? Spending the rest of my life eight hours a day with a fake smile plastered on my face, checking out books, and then coming home to cook dinner for you, the same meals over and over again, whatever the week's coupons will allow? Only going out to restaurants for special occasions, birthdays or anniversaries, skipping the appetizers, coming home for desert. Do you think that's going to make me happy?

Once she could imagine a future free of middle class financial stress, Sarah now knows that Hank's salary will never permit them to live a life filed with the shallow comforts and distractions she craves. She's come to look down on her own life as someone slightly higher up on the social ladder would. Throughout this entire scene, Sarah and Hank are shot in that soft, warm glow of their living room lights. We hear their infant daughter crying in the background, her needs for the moment ignored. Hank's fixed stare and set jaw make it plain that he only has one choice.

The kind of brutal calculation which we see in Hank and Sarah is completely absent from the crimes that Jacob commits throughout *A Simple Plan*. Raimi's depiction of this brother undercuts stereotypical assumptions about the moral worth of the lower class. Jacob's ethical choices aren't coldly thought out. Rather, they're instinctive responses. He only attacks Dwight because he panics and doesn't know what else to do, and he's horrified when he thinks he's accidentally killed Dwight. Later, as Hank is frantically staging a snowmobile wreck to cover up the murder, Jacob matter of factly explains what he's decided:

The bedroom becomes a site for quarrelling over whether to keep the money or turn it in to the police.

> We're just gonna have to tell on ourselves.

Later, when they're supposed to entrap Lou on tape, Jacob speaks with what looks at first like drunken petulance but is, instead, simple moral clarity. He suddenly looks over at Hank and says in that same reasonable tone:

> I'm not gonna do it, Hank. It's not fair. It isn't right.

Hank finally murders his brother in cold blood.

After Lou's murder, when Jacob's turned up drunk and Hank's trying to soothe his brother to sleep with a childhood trick, Jacob chills Hank by asking him,

> Do you feel evil?

On several other occasions—at their father's grave, and just before framing Lou—Jacob looks his brother in the eye and asks him, with disgust and sorrow,

> What's the matter with you?

In a drama that harks back to Macbeth, the crows are harbingers of death and...

Hank's elaborate justifications for betrayal and murder don't make sense to Jacob. His basic decency is uncorrupted by education or ambition.

In fact, how we view Jacob's character and actions serves as Raimi's litmus test for the viewers and for whether or not they're paying attention to his film. The same internalized middle class values that have conditioned Hank to see his brother as worthless and stupid have conditioned many viewers to see him that way, too. But he's not. On a number of occasions, Jacob looks at his brother as though Hank's the slow one because Hank is just grasping something that Jacob has understood all along. Jacob says, again and again, as if chiding Hank to pay attention and catch up:

> Come on, Hank, you know that.

...are introduced early in a horrifying scene when Hank breaks into the plane. Here in close up a crow eats out the eyes of the dead pilot

And in fact all the things Jacob has to explain to Hank would be clear enough if Hank weren't blinded by his own conceit and denial. He buries the knowledge that their father took out a second mortgage on their farm just to send Hank to college, and that the father didn't die accidentally but killed himself for the insurance money in order to help out the family. Rather than face these facts, Hank has dismissed his father as a "bad businessman." In contrast, Jacob's version of their dad's life reveals that the father sacrificed everything, even his own life, to provide his family opportunities for advancement he never had. Jacob says of their father's suicide,

> He always wanted to get everything set up. He always wanted to have just enough to take care of things and relax. He never quite had that. I guarantee you if he had this [four million dollars], he would still be here, he never would have done that.

For Hank and Jacob's father, the system failed. Hard work never paid off, he couldn't get ahead, and the responsibility of supporting a family literally killed him. Hank refuses to see these things because that understanding would challenge his image of himself as a man who's earned what he has by smarts and hard work. Instead, he would have to see himself as the beneficiary of other people's suffering and sacrifice. But these facts are plain enough to Jacob. He is not invested in illusions of merit. The film makes it clear in its characterizations of the two brothers that worth isn't a matter of intelligence but of truthfulness. By society's standards, Jacob is a loser compared to his successful brother, but Raimi shows us he's the better man.

As bitter and bleak as any crime novel of the Thirties or Forties, the final unbearable minutes of

A Simple Plan are the stuff of Greek tragedy, and just as cathartic. Lured into the woods by a fake FBI agent who turns out to be the brother of the kidnapper who crashed the plane, Hank and Jacob's actions echo their father's sacrifice to save his family. The Mitchells reenact the futility of their father's last desperate grasp for the American Dream. The fake agent guns down the sheriff, and Hank, who's become a more cold blooded killer with experience, returns the favor.

Immediately Hank begins to hatch an elaborate cover story for him and Jacob, but Jacob can't continue living with the knowledge of what he's done. Hank tries one last time to convince his brother to keep wading across the river of blood they're already close to drowning in:

> You want to be happy? You want a wife and kids, me and you sitting around on the porch drinking late at night? Well, goddamn it, this is what it *costs*.

Hank's remarks sum up the dictates of capitalist society: The only way for a man to make it in this world is to murder and lie. Consumed by horror and guilt, Jacob finally turns down the prize of a respectable family life, begging his brother to shoot him and "make it look like the bad guy did it." He says to Hank:

> I don't want to sit around the rest of my life and think about this shit. I can't do it... You can do this, and it's going to be perfect for you.

Jacob understands now that his dream life would be nothing more than a lie and the allure it once held for him is gone. But he still sees Hank's family as a reason for his brother to go on living. Like their father, Jacob sacrifices himself to protect his own brother's prosperous lifestyle.

And, as was his father's suicide, Jacob's death is in vain. Learning that one out of every ten bills has had its serial number recorded by federal agents, Hank burns the money in his fireplace, the hearth and center of the home. The bills go up in smoke, Hank's stern face framed by the fires that consume them. He and Sarah return to their jobs, performing the endless routines they longed to escape.

In *A Simple Plan's* final shot, we see the rundown, empty farmhouse where Hank and Jacob grew up, its tattered curtains billowing like ghosts in the winter breeze. The film ends on an image of utter desolation and loss—the Home gutted and empty. For Jacob and Lou, the American dream couldn't be earned by hard work, or even be stolen, since they lived too far outside our society's proscribed parameters. And for Hank Mitchell, the dream can't be held onto. It all drifts away in the end like the snow swirling down out of Raimi's gray empty sky. Whether we work for it or kill for it, *A Simple Plan* shows us that striving for the American Dream ends up killing us all.

Continued: *Spider-Man*

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Spider-Man

1. *Spider-Man:* Comic book visual style and romance

Mary Jane's kisses Spider-Man upside down.

She laughs in the rain.

Cut to the city of gold in the morning.

An evil black contrail is etched across the sky over Times Square. A bright red and blue figure bounds from one giant parade balloon to another as though they were steppingstones. The villain shakes a green armored fist, twisting on his sputtering rocket sled, and snarls,

> We'll meet again, Spider-Man!

Mary Jane pulls Spider-Man's mask tenderly over his lips to kiss him as he hangs upside down from a strand of webbing. Then, when he vanishes back into the dark sky, she laughs as the rain splashes on her face in ecstatic slow motion. Cut to the New York skyline, a city of gold in the morning. After the somber palette of *A Simple Plan*, the garish four color beauty of *Spider-Man* may seem like so much adolescent escapism. This is exactly the sort of big dumb commercial property we imagine a director grudgingly agreeing to take on in order to finance uncompromising little films like *A Simple Plan*.

It is a tribute to Sam Raimi's artfulness and care that in a film fraught with such commercial expectations, he's able to express the same deeper concerns about class that he does more explicitly in *A Simple Plan*. With its unobtrusive subtext brought into sharper relief by the shadow of that darker film, *Spider-Man* can be seen to depict exactly the same conflict between family and society, love and responsibility. But the blockbuster conveys its moral messages about class and family in the more colorful costumes and broader dramatics of allegory. And, being a fantasy, it's a more hopeful film, showing us someone confronted with the same hard choice Hank Mitchell faces, but making the right one.

The most obvious subtext in *Spider-Man* is about adolescence, appropriately so for a film aimed at

2. Adolescence

that demographic. Its opening line is the eternal adolescent question:

> Who am I?

Its hero, Peter Parker, is a pale, sunken chested, prepubescent looking nerd who suddenly finds himself possessed of new strength and strange powers. In particular, he can sprout coarse dark hairs and squirt sticky white glop with a flick of the wrist. When he starts spending a lot of time holed up in his bedroom with the door closed, getting in fights at school, and mooning after girls, his surrogate parents worry that he might be on drugs. But a slightly deeper subtext concerns another great power and responsibility we have to grapple with when we come of age: money and work. Raimi's film here is about the choices we make early on in life about our goals, careers, family and duty. This question is usually phrased as

> *What do you want to do with your life?*

Peter's loving aunt and uncle worry he might be on drugs.

It's another way of asking,

> *Who am I going to be?*

Peter, the nerdy school photographer, is visiting Oscorp with his class.

As in most of Raimi's films, the movie's central characters are working class. Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson have grown up side by side in small tract houses in Queens. Peter lives with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben, who's been laid off from work after thirty-five years as senior electrician at the plant. He grumbles, getting rueful grunts and chuckles from a Bush-era audience:

> They're downsizing the employees and upsizing the profits.

The big guys shove him and make him lose a shot.

Next door Mary Jane (or "M.J.," as Peter calls her) has an unhappier home life. We overhear her father hectoring her to get him another beer and calling her "trash."

As in *A Simple Plan*, the early part of the film highlights the distinct class differences between its characters. Peter and M.J.'s stereotypical working class backgrounds are contrasted to that of their friend Harry Osborne. Harry's lifestyle

At Oscorp, Peter gets the transforming spider bite.

and pedigree are almost as cartoonishly upper class as Richie Rich's or Scrooge McDuck's. The first time we see Harry, he's embarrassed because his dad's dropping him off at a field trip in a Rolls. The public school kids mock him about his pampered wealth. Flash Thompson croons:

> His father will fire your father.

His muscles grow.

Harry and his father live in a penthouse mansion that looks like an evil fairytale castle brooding over the city. Harry, however, isn't quite the same sort of callous, hateful rich kid that James Spader always used to play in John Hughes' movies. He's nice but weak and insecure, the sort of guy who anxiously offers to buy expensive gifts for his girlfriend to win back her affection. That's the only expression of affection he's ever gotten from his own father, whose approval he anxiously craves. He's attracted to M.J. who he hopes is an acquisition that will impress his dad. Thus he's critical when she doesn't show up to meet his father in the dress he suggested she wear.

He can sprout coarse dark hairs and squirt sticky white glop with a flick of the wrist

Unlike capable but expendable Ben Parker or Mary Jane's drunk, unemployable dad, Harry's father, Norman Osborne, is a capitalist success story. He's a self made man, an inventor turned entrepreneur. As he boasts to the board of Oscorp,

> I created this company. Do you know
> how much I've sacrificed?

Some of those "sacrifices" are obvious. He speaks with contempt of his late wife and neglects his needy, struggling son. As he admits to Harry,

> I know I haven't always been there.

He shows more interest in his son's friend Peter Parker, who impresses the older man by having read some of his obscure scientific papers. Norman offers to help the youth find a job, but admires Peter's insistence on making it himself, "under your own steam." It's clear from his nostalgic smile that Norman sees in Peter the young man he once was—a young scientific

Uncle Ben looking for work says, “They’re downsizing the employees and upsizing the profits.”

Peter has the pleasure of defeating the school bully.

Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson have grown up side by side in small tract houses in Queens.

The Osbornes live in a penthouse mansion that looks like an evil fairytale castle brooding over the city.

prodigy from a poor neighborhood who’ll have to make his own way in the world by wits and sheer will. Looking on, Harry unhappily gnaws a hangnail, obviously worrying about what his distant father must think of him, a kid who’s been given everything he has. He jokes nervously to Peter:

> I think he wants to adopt you.

Norman’s ominous “paternal” interest in Parker will be exposed by his alter ego, the Green Goblin. As the powerful antagonist Norman/Green Goblin strives to exert a corrupting influence over Peter. As an evil force, Norman wants to turn Peter into a creature like himself—driven by financial ambition, alienated from the family for whom he thinks he’s doing it all, angry and alone.

At the beginning of the film, Peter is at the point where he has to decide what he’s going to do with his life, what kind of person he’s going to become. His uncle tells him:

> These are the years when a man
> changes into the man he’s going to be
> for the rest of your life. Just be careful
> who you change into.

Given his background, when Peter gains superhuman powers (a metaphor for the powers of manhood), his first impulse is to use them to make some quick cash. He sees an ad in the paper offering a $3000 prize for anyone who can go three minutes in the ring with a professional wrestler. Immediately he imagines buying a sportscar, like Flash Thompson’s, to impress the girl next door. Superimposed images of car ads and Mary Jane’s admiring face drift over Peter as he intently sketches ideas for his cool wrestling costume in his high school spiral notebook.

This scene is a fond homage to every four eyed, 98 pound weakling who ever imagined how his life would change once he took that Charles Atlas bodybuilding course or got those X-ray specs in the mail or started making real money hustling *Grit*. Notice that all of these promises—muscles, X-ray vision, fast cash—are really about the same thing: girls. They’re also the same sorts of scams we see on late night infomercials that prey on the insecurities of the poor—for exercise equipment, crash diets, pyramid real estate schemes—all the kind of quick self-improvement that people at the bottom the social ladder grab onto in desperation. There are no more conspicuous and coveted emblems of status for a middle-class adolescent male than a hot car and a hotter chick — accessories unattainable for a kid like Parker whose uncle is out of work.

In the comic book, Peter Parker's motive for becoming a masked wrestler is nobler. There his only thought is to make some extra money to help out his aunt and uncle. The change is significant. In this movie, Peter's basically a good kid, but he's not some saint. He's no more innately altruistic than you or me. He only learns from pain and loss that money is a shallow, misguided goal.

Peter wins his wrestling match, and for a euphoric moment, his arms raised in victory, a dazed, incredulous grin dawning across his face, he enjoys the spotlight, the cheering crowd, the exhilaration and glamor of fame. But behind the scenes of this tacky spectacle he faces his real test, and he fails. In a dingy little office we see the manager's desk stacked with cash. Peter's eyes widen, taking it all in, counting the bills as the manager fans them out, imagining not only that sportscar but all the wealth and possibilities his new powers are going to bring him. But his face then darken in confusion and then anger as he's handed a single paltry hundred. He's being cheated out of the full amount because of a fine print clause—the match didn't go the full three minutes. Peter protests:

> I need that money.

The manager sneers back:

> I missed the part where that's my problem.

Peter's hardly left the office in disgust when a man barges in with a gun and orders the manager to start stuffing the money in a sack. The thief is making his escape, running down the hallway toward an elevator door that's just opened for Peter, when the manager yells, "Stop him!" Peter, bitter about how he's just been screwed over, stands aside to let the man escape. The manager

Harry Osborne, a stereotypical rich kid, is Peter's friend and dates Mary Jane hoping to impress his father with this beautiful "acquisition."

Go three minutes in the ring with a professional wrestler.

Peter designs his costume. In the ring, it's only a sweatshirt with a drawing on it. Later it becomes exactly as he drew it.

Superimposed images of Mary Jane's admiring face and car ads make the scene a fond homage to every four eyed, 98 pound weakling who hoped his life would change if he took a Charles Atlas bodybuilding course.

whines:

> You coulda taken that guy apart. Now he's gonna get away wit' my money!

Peter coldly throws the manager's line back in his face:

> I missed the part where that's *my* problem.

Peter smirks to himself, pleased with his zinger and his new streetwise, looking-out-for-number-one attitude. This dialogue is conspicuous. It is the only cool, arrogant tough-guy line the hero speaks in this action movie (as opposed to the cornball wisecracks he tosses off during fights), and it immediately comes back to haunt him.

The fight manager won't pay him but...

Echoing the manager's words, Peter adopts his middle class, "what's in it for me" philosophy as well. When Peter hits the manager back with his own line, he looks at the boy with a kind of grudging respect. The manager is a smaller-time version of the kind of capitalist villain that Norman epitomizes, exploiting others for his own gain. Spoken here is the same hardheaded, coldhearted attitude Sarah drills into Hank in *A Simple Plan*. Although Peter only slips up for a moment, someone he loves dies as a consequence of his indifference.

...give a glance of grudging respect after Peter deliberately lets a thief go who just stuck up the promoter's office. However, during the getaway...

The robber that Peter let go carjacks his Uncle Ben for a getaway vehicle, shooting the uncle fatally. *This* is the part where it's the youth's problem. Peter's failure to act is a failure to see beyond his own paycheck. The story of Uncle Ben is scripted as pointed as a parable. The circumstances of Ben's death shows us how shortsighted Peter's mindset is, and how lethal. Like Norman Osborne, and Hank Mitchell, Peter has lost family because he was so distracted by ambition and greed. But, unlike them, Peter will learn from his loss. Had his uncle not died, the money grubbing manager's callous attitude might have hardened in Peter, and he might have gone

...the robber shoots Uncle Ben, who dies on the street holding his remorseful nephew's hand. Uncle Ben warns the youth, "With great power comes great responsibility."

on to ruthless success like Norman Osborne. Because of this tragedy and its lesson, Peter decides to be a hero instead.

After high-school graduation, inspired by the memory of his uncle's warning that "with great power comes great responsibility," Peter gives up his ambition of making big money. Instead, he takes on the anonymous, thankless job of being Spider-Man—thwarting bodega stickups, stopping purse snatchers and jewel thieves, and having the time of his life.

Peter gets a job as a tabloid photographer working for the skinflint editor, J. Jonah Johnson.

Peter also lands a day job as a tabloid photographer, which isn't going to make him rich either. The editor is the notorious skinflint J. Jonah Jameson, who has his secretary tell his wife to order whichever wallpaper's the cheapest for their home. When Peter joins the paper, Jameson won't even take him on as a salaried employee, but insists on paying him freelance:

> Meat! I'll send you a nice box of Christmas meat. That's the best I can do for you.

Both Peter and M.J. are trying to stay true to their ideals while somehow paying the bills. Like every other girl who moves to New York, M.J. wants to be an actress, but at her auditions she's been getting advice to take acting lessons. It's pretty clear, from their first jobs, that neither of them is going to make it far with just big dreams and hard work. When Peter invites M.J. out for dinner he tells her,

> The sky's the limit—up to seven dollars and eighty-four cents.

Mary Jane tries to tell Peter she is successful, but her boss yells in the background that the till is short $6.

Better to have advantages and connections like their friend Harry's. M.J.'s embarrassed when Peter finds out her real job. He catches her getting off from her shift at a greasy spoon, where her boss is yelling at her that her drawer was short six dollars. She begs him not to tell Harry:

> I'm afraid he'd think it was low or something.

It's an odd word choice, "low." That's not the sort of word you'd expect an eighteen year old girl to

Then she shamefully reveals to Peter that she is really only a waitress.

Visually comparable, Peter tears off his shirt to become Spider-Man when Mary Jane and others are in dire straits.

use in conversation. It connotes not only baseness, something that's "beneath" you, but class status. Peter makes a wry joke:

> Harry doesn't really live on a little place I like to call Earth.

The world where both Peter and M.J. live is a planet of high rent, dead-end employment, and embarrassing compromises. M.J. pulls open her overcoat, with a rueful "ta-dah" look, to show Peter her tacky orange and white waitress uniform with the plastic nametag. Here her action unconsciously echoes Peter's tearing open his shirt to reveal his red and blue costume with its iconic spider. The diner waitress "Mary Jane" is M.J.'s own secret identity. As Peter says,

> That's not low. You have a job.

He's learned the hard way what a moment in the spotlight is worth. Now he can see the heroism in unglamorous integrity.

Continued: Stormin' Norman

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Stormin' Norman

Norman Osborne has his own shameful secret identity—the Green Goblin. Taunting alter ego Norman for his repression and weakness, the Goblin describes his own job:

> To say what you can't. To do what you won't.

But the Green Goblin isn't just an incarnation of the capering Id unbound, like Edward Hyde. In this film the Green Goblin is a distinctly *lower-class* alter ego. For example, although corporate founder Norman Osborne speaks with a cultured Mid-Atlantic accent, when he becomes the Goblin he suddenly reverts to a low comedy Bronx growl with the voice of a cartoon cab driver or construction worker. Listen to the way the Green Goblin says "I suh-rendah!" to the cops, raising his arms in mock compliance, before he clobbers them all. This is the voice of Norman's own original self, the rough working class kid he's successfully smoothed over.

Norman shares some other vestigial traits with those whom he considers his social inferiors. Mary Jane's drunken father tells her:

> You'll always be trash, just like her [her mother]!

Norman, who also takes to drinking alone, repeats the same slur, telling his son that Mary Jane will turn out just like his mother. (Notice that Harry's dead mother, seen in a portrait in Norman's home, was a red-haired beauty like Mary Jane.) He snarls, lapsing into the Goblin's voice:

> Do what you need to with her, then broom her fast.

This is the crudest, most blatant expression of Norman's capitalist, exploitative attitude toward

3. The Green Goblin

Norman Osborne designs futuristic weapons at Oscorp...

....including the spider that bites and transforms Peter.

The generals don't like the demo of the new weapons Norman is designing for them so...

people in general: Use them and discard them. For all his trappings of wealth and success, his suits and manners, underneath it all Norman is still as much a mean drunk as M.J.'s dad. He hasn't left the vulgarity and thuggishness of his roots behind. Now he's merely sublimated them to the Goblin's mercenary purposes.

...he experiments with the serum on himself and becomes...

Which brings us to the other way that the Goblin outs Norman's real nature. Norman tells Aunt May after getting in from another day of setting tenements on fire and hurling bombs as the Green Goblin:

> Work was murder.

....the Green Goblin.

This is the sort of heavy handed double entendre we've come to expect in Hollywood action flicks, but this line has a double edge. The Green Goblin's work literally is murder, of course. But just as literally so is Norman Osborne's. Norman works as a defense contractor, inventing more efficient, higher-tech means of destruction. The serum that gives him superhuman strength and all his outlandish weapons were developed by Norman's legitimate business for the U.S. government. His son's nickname for him is "Stormin' Norman," like Norman Schwarzkopf, the architect of Desert Storm.

The Green Goblin threatens Peter's editor and when Spider-Man appears, paralyzes the hero with a toxic gas developed at Oscorp.

The first thing Norman does as the Goblin is to kill one of his researchers, who publicly voiced some reservations about the dangerous side effects of one of Oscorp's products. Norman first appears in the Goblin's armor immediately after he's been forced out of the company he founded. He swoops into a meeting of executives and generals assembled for a demonstration for a rival contractor's flying exoskeleton prototype; flying in on his stolen rocket sled Norman blows the other weapon up. Talk about making an aggressive move against a competitor. Later he turns the board of directors who have ousted him into skeletons.

The point is that the Goblin isn't just spreading random mayhem for the fun of it. His strategic strikes and assassinations follow a corporate agenda. It's the continuation of office politics by other means. And, at the risk of stretching things, we might point out that Norman Osborne's alter ago is green. Green is traditionally the color of the supernatural (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*)

On a rooftop, Norman as Green Goblin tries to get the immobilized Spider-Man to join him.

The film glories in comic book scenes of Spider-Man's prowess.

The Green Goblin holds a cable car in one hand and Mary Jane in the other, and tells Spider-Man to choose which to save. Both fall toward the ground at once.

but also, in American culture, it's the color of money and opportunity (like the green light that inspires the young roughneck Jimmy Gatz to invent his own alter ego, Jay Gatsby). The Goblin presents us with a caricature of what the "self-made man" has to make himself into in order to make it in the corporate world. He needs to become a vicious rogue who pursues his own interests with manic single mindedness. He's heedless of the collateral damage he inflicts, whether they're casualties abroad or laid off workers like Uncle Ben.

At one point the Goblin whisks Spiderman off to share with him his personal philosophy, a sort of Nietzscheism as interpreted by Trump or Madonna:

> Here's the real truth: there are eight million people in this city, and those teeming masses exist for the sole purpose of lifting the few exceptional people onto their shoulders. You and me, we're exceptional. I'm offering you a choice: join me. Imagine what we could accomplish together, what we could create, what we could destroy.

This scene, set on a rooftop overlooking the sparkling towers of Manhattan, is the comic book equivalent of the Temptation, where the Devil offered Christ "all the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor." It's the same bribe that capitalism holds out to its best and brightest, the Worldly treasures of illimitable wealth and power. If we look past the lurid masks in this scene, we see a member of the corporate elite offering all the rewards of success to his young protégé if only the youth will get with the program already and quit bucking the system. When Spiderman rebukes his offer, the Goblin resorts to terrorizing Peter's Aunt May and kidnapping Mary Jane. The Goblin attacks Parker's family because he calculates that Peter's attachment to them will overpower any other scruples, as it has already done with Norman (and as it did with Hank Mitchell in *A*

The Goblin's Dilemma as reflected in Spider-Man's eyes.

Simple Plan). A true capitalist, the Green Goblin assumes that everyone is as purely motivated by self interest as he is, and can be manipulated accordingly. The Green Goblin doesn't want to kill Spider-Man. He wants the same thing Norman Osborne wants— to bribe or blackmail Peter Parker into becoming as amoral as he is.

Using the conventions of the comic book genre to tremendous effect in the climatic confrontation between Spider-Man and the Green Goblin, Raimi starkly illustrates the cruel choice our self-centered capitalist society demands we make. Spider-Man finds the Goblin atop the Brooklyn Bridge, dangling M.J. from one hand and a cable car full of children from the other. "This is why only fools are heroes," he explains. "Because you never know when some lunatic will come along with a sadistic choice: let die the woman you love —or—suffer the little children!" The choice confronting Peter Parker is made visually literal as the Goblin drops them both; we see Mary Jane and the cable car plummeting in slow motion, each reflected in one of Spider-Man's mirrored eyes.

The Goblin cannot act any further because the common people stone him.

We might call it The Goblin's Dilemma: the choice between the people we love most, our family, and the rest of society. Norman Osborne has already made his choice: the advancement of his own family at the expense of those faceless foreigners against whom his company's deadly hardware will be used. Hank Mitchell makes the same choice in *A Simple Plan*, stealing and lying and even killing his neighbors to ensure his own wife and child's material comfort. It's the choice most people make —to create the best life they can for themselves and their families. In our society, it's an unassailable justification for almost anything, given as a defensive excuse for conducting unethical business, exploiting others, ignoring the hungry, the homeless, the foreigners we bomb. Protect your own and to hell with everyone else: that's the Goblin's Law, and he expects his adversary to do the same thing.

In their final fight on another rooftop, the Green Goblin, here unmasked as Norman, makes a pathetic dying plea to Spider-Man: "Don't tell Harry."

Spider-Man, however, dives off the bridge, shooting a web to break his fall and swooping around to catch them both. He refuses to make the choice, because his uncle’s murder has shown him that the Goblin’s Dilemma is a false one. Your personal interests are not separate from society’s; to protect your own loved ones, you have to fight for justice in the world. To save Uncle Ben, you have to stop that thief; for your family’s sake, you cannot steal the four million. Spider-Man hangs there suspended, desperately holding onto M.J. and the cable car, torn between his love and his responsibility, as though they might pull him apart.

Continued: The Goblin’s dilemma resolved

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4. *Spider-Man*'s love story

After Spider-Man saves Mary Jane, there are images of comic book romance of them in flight.

She is dressed up because she had been at a party with Harry Osborne. She's clearly fallen in love with Spider-Man.

The Goblin's dilemma resolved

In the end, even Spider-Man can't withstand this tension by himself, any more than the rest of us can. At the climax of this superhero movie, its eponymous hero has to be rescued by a bunch of extras: a crowd of ordinary passersby on the bridge who hurl debris at the Goblin when he tries to cut Spider-Man's lifeline, a barge captain who plows resolutely through the waters to catch the cable car when Spidey lowers it. Mary Jane, the diner waitress, finds the courage to slide down the cable to safety. These are the same working-class types we see in the man-on-the-street interviews earlier in the film, unloading trucks, working construction, standing outside their delis. They're the people Raimi has always made his heroes.

In the clinch, even J. Jonah Jameson, the yellow journalist who's played for laughs with his rapid-fire delivery, deskful of antacids, and two-toned brush-cut, shows what he's really made of: when corporate heavyweight Norman Osborne dangles this stressed-out, ulcerous manager from a twentieth-story window and demands to know who's been taking those photos of Spider-Man, J.J.J. stonewalls him, refusing to give up his freelance employee even though Parker's standing right there.

The same supposedly dumb, fickle masses that the Goblin despises now join together in moral outrage to pelt him with insults and garbage. "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!" a cab driver on the bridge explains, brandishing a tire iron. If this were a scene in some dreary socialist play calling for the solidarity of the proletariat, we'd roll our eyes, but dressed up in the cool costumes and special effects of *Spider-Man*, it doesn't seem didactic or dull.

A lot of critics called this a cynically calculated moment to cash in on the emotions of 9/11, but

When she asks who he is, he says, “You know me.”

At his father’s funeral, Harry vows to catch the “murderer,” making way for a sequel. Peter kisses her but says goodbye, that he'll only be a friend and nothing more.

She seems to understand Spider-Man’s true identity from that kiss. Only the sequel will let us know for sure.

Raimi’s point is larger than that: the only way to save the world from the silk-suited villains with superweapons, men whose lifestyles are sustained by the labor of the very people they view with contempt, is to abandon the selfish desires that divide us and kick their asses.

After a final knock down, drag out fight, Norman Osborne unmasks himself and makes a final appeal to Peter Parker. Norman says he’s tried to be like a father to the young man and asks Peter to think of himself as his son. This creepy, Vaderesque “I am your real father” business has to do with the opposing options represented by Norman and Peter’s dead uncle. Confronted with this final, clear choice between the role model of the powerful, unscrupulous weapons magnate and the example of an honest electrician who died unemployed, Peter answers:

> I had a father. His name was Ben Parker.

Only now, when every lure and threat has failed and his last offer has been thrown in his face, does the Goblin really try to kill Parker. Impaled on the prongs of one of his own products, choking up blood, Osborne makes a last request:

> Don’t tell Harry.

It’s the same favor Mary Jane asks when Peter catches her in her waitress uniform. At the film’s beginning, Norman soberly told his son, “You don’t ever need to be ashamed of who you are,” but now he, like Mary Jane, is afraid that Harry will find out he’s become something “low.” His pathetic dying plea reminds us of Jacob Mitchell begging his brother to kill him in *A Simple Plan*, asking only,

> You just tell the little girl [Hank’s daughter] that bear was from me.

Like Hank Mitchell, in his pursuit of a scheme to enrich and protect his own, Norman Osborne’s made himself unworthy of their love or respect—a thing to be ashamed of and kept secret. A villain, a monster. What Jacob called Evil.

The last scene of the film takes place in a cemetery where Norman Osborne is being buried. This is where the path that he offered Peter inevitably leads. Having made his choice, Norman has lost it all—his company, his wife, and his son Harry, now white faced and vowing revenge. Like Norman, Hank Mitchell in *A Simple Plan* also loses everything in the end. He loses his brother, his wife's respect, and what peace of mind he once had. Those black crows that haunted him throughout *A Simple Plan* were harbingers of death. In *Spider-Man* Peter Parker is right. He is not like Norman, and he makes a different, harder choice. At the end of the film, when Mary Jane admits that she loves him, he tells her he will always be there for her as her friend and guardian. However, he knows now not only that she'll always be at risk if she's with him, but also that he cannot let himself protect her at the cost of letting anyone else die. His loyalty cannot be exclusively to her. *With great power also comes great responsibility*. He walks away from her, hard faced and alone, leaving the love of his life weeping in a graveyard.

Peter's loyalty cannot be exclusively to Mary Jane. *With great power also comes great responsibility.* He walks away from her, hard faced and alone, leaving the love of his life weeping in a graveyard.

This penultimate shot of the movie echoes the ending of John Ford's *The Searchers,* when John Wayne turns away from the happy ending framed in the doorway and heads back out into the harsh desert sun. He's leaving the comfort of the Home for the dangers of the Frontier, where he belongs. In American mythology, society's protector is always an outsider, barred from the luxuries he preserves for others—from stability, from love. He always ends up alone. The cowboy rides off into the sunset. The detective toasts himself with a shot of rye. The superhero keeps his lonely rooftop vigil. The last vertiginous shots of Spider-Man swinging through the city on patrol may be spectacular, but it's no longer fun.

It was fun early on when he first tested his powers or rescued Mary Jane from the collapsing balcony, when he swung off whooping with wild teenage joy at his newfound powers. Then his shouts echoed in the steel canyons of Manhattan. You could even hear the distant thunk as he kicked off from the plate glass window of a skyscraper. It was a moment of thrilling comic-book beauty. At the end, by contrast, the music is steely and somber, a hymn to grim determination. We last see Spider-Man flying backed by a titanic, rippling American flag. His heroics have become a duty. A job. *Who am I?* Peter Parker asks, reprising the question that opens the film. His answer sounds not like a boast but an acceptance: *I'm Spider-Man*.

Sam Raimi's directorial choices challenge the elitist distinction between high and low art. As *A Simple Plan* and *Spider-Man* illustrate, we don't need to make the Goblin's choice in art either. Films with a social conscience can also be fun; we can be edified and bettered by the juvenile crap that's dearest to our hearts. *A Simple Plan* is not a "better" film than *Spider-Man* just because it's darker and more adult. And *Spider-Man* is not just excusable because it dresses up a clever anti-capitalist agenda in the costumes of a commercial blockbuster. Both movies tell the same story of how the lust for illusory power and security turns people into selfish monsters, and how decency sometimes means turning your back on your fondest ambitions. These are lessons that need to be taught again and again to each new generation.

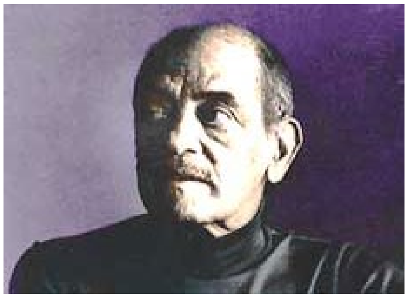
People, however, are seldom moved by rational argument; they need those lessons enacted in emotionally compelling ways. Films like *A Simple Plan* show us, with cold detachment, what we're capable of at our worst when we rush down the lonely, narrowing path of self-interest. Films like *Spider-Man*, primarily aimed at children and adolescents, serve the same function as Aesop's fables and morality plays—to show their audience, as George Lucas put it, "hey, this is right, this is wrong." They give us hope that we can be better than we are. Of course such films are not about how the world really is; they're about how it ought to be. If they're serious and thoughtful enough to hold adults' interest, they take on a poignant resonance because we know now that the world isn't like that. But they still remind us of how we thought it was supposed to be, and of who we once thought we would become.

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A beautiful mind(fuck): Hollywood structures of identity

by Jonathan Eig

The Sixth Sense initiated a series of films problematizing the hero's very identity.



The grandfather of the modern mindfuck film is Luis Buñuel.

It has been more than sixty years since Toto tore the cover off the Wizard of Oz and more than forty since Sam Loomis unmasked Norman Bates. Narrative surprises about the identity of major characters are not new in Hollywood film. But three characteristics distinguish movies like *The Sixth Sense, Fight Club, Memento, Mulholland Drive,* and *Donnie Darko* from past, more typical, Hollywood identity-surprises.

First, in these films the character with the surprise invariably is the protagonist, as opposed to a supporting character who affects a more "normal" hero. The next two characteristics work in tandem. The hero in question does not know the true nature of his identity and so is not simply keeping a secret from us. And the audience does not know the backstory either. We are not let in on a secret the hero does not know. A sudden boomlet of movies intentionally lie to the audience and manipulate viewers' emotional investment in the heroes. In critical circles, these movies have developed a trendy name: *mindfucks*.

The two Davids—Lynch and Fincher—are the modern-day champions of the mindfuck film, but they certainly owe a large debt to Luis Buñuel, who made a career out of yanking the rug out from under his audience. From the avant-garde *Un Chien Andalou* and the "is it real?" documentary *Land Without Bread* early in his career, right up until the final shot of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and the double female lead in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, Buñuel played with our perceptions of his characters, simultaneously involving us in fictional lives and reminding us that what we are seeing is flickering light in the image of actors—a representation of a representation.

The current crop of Hollywood mindfucks from 1999-2001 no doubt has been fertilized by several successful “surprise” movies from the recent past. Both Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1992) and Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1994) boasted Oscar-winning screenplays and significant profits; artistic and financial success mark them as more widely seen than previous cult favorites like Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985)and Adrian Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990). But the heavy hitter in this recent history is M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

The Sixth Sense employs a plot device characteristic of all the recent mindfuck movies. At some point in the first act, after a character’s life is threatened, the story is either interrupted for a flashback to show how we arrived at this point (*Fight Club* and *Memento*) or the character appears to survive the threat. In *The Sixth Sense*, we will come to learn that Malcolm Crowe did not in fact survive, that at least part of his subsequent story has been illusory. That will be the big climactic surprise.

Forerunners confronted the nature of their identity when in crisis. Here, the unnamed hero of *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (La Riviere du Hibou)*, with a hangman’s noose around his neck, and ...

... Jacob Singer in *Jacob’s Ladder*.

Such a narrative device did not originate with Shyamalan. Modern drama has paid plenty of attention to the nature of man’s life and death, from the mainstream of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* to the absurdism of Samuel Becket’s *Endgame*. Two earlier films employ an identical device: Robert Enrico’s Oscar-winning short *La Riviere du Hibou* (based on Ambrose Bierce’s story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and initially shown to a large American audience as part of *The Twilight Zone*[1] television show in 1964) as well as Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder*. But neither led to similarly constructed movies nor did they generate $300 million dollar ticket sales in initial release, as *The Sixth Sense* did.

The Sixth Sense differs from the other recent

The Sixth Sense's shrink hero. Malcolm Crowe, like many mindfuck heroes, faces acute identity confusion because he is self deluded.

mindfucks in having little commentary on social, political, and economic forces affecting us at the end of the 20th century, confining its exploration to its characters' personal journeys (perhaps a major factor in its extraordinary success.) In the entertainment industry, financial success constitutes an essential step forward in the development of a narrative or aesthetic form. *The Sixth Sense* opened up public awareness, and consequently Hollywood's interest, in such constructions.

Another 2001 Hollywood release which certainly merits discussion as a mindfuck, Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others*, has been closely linked with *The Sixth Sense* in critical circles. *The Others* not only shares the mindfuck device of having a character unaware of the nature of her existence, (in this case Grace Stewart and her two children do not realize that they are dead), but it also shares an utter lack of concern with any social, political, or philosophical explanation for the delusion. Though the characters have superficial discussions of religion, *The Others*, like *The Sixth Sense*, has a plot that remains primarily personal. Since its characters do not die on screen, and are, in fact, long dead, the story does not examine the cause of their death. More than any other current mindfuck, *The Others* is a pure ghost story that employs this popular modern device for dramatic rather than thematic purposes.

Brad Pitt plays a typical David Fincher hero is *Se7en*, extremely confident and sure of himself....

Today's mindfucks differ from those of Buñuel in two key ways. Foremost, the plots are constructed to hide the surprise and rely on misdirection, or in the case of *Usual Suspects*, outright lying. (It is not simply Verbal Kint who lies in *Usual Suspects*. Brian Singer, the man behind the camera, lies to us as well when he shows us a shot of coiled ropes behind which we assume Verbal is watching the drama unfold.) For Buñuel, the movie was never

...But his confidence later fails when confronted by an outside force.

In *Fight Club* Pitt plays a similarly confident character..

...Pitt's character gains in power and destructive force because of the hero's obliviousness to his own identity.

Fight Club: Tyler Durden meets Tyler Durden.

about the surprise. It was simply one of the devices he used to tell a story. But today, even in movies like *Fight Club* and *Memento*, which elucidate sophisticated social or philosophical points of view, the fact of the surprise is so big as to overwhelm the rest of the viewing experience. You do not have to be a structuralist to see that these movies owe their impact at least as much to the way they are told as to the stories they are telling.

But the most intriguing departure from Buñuel is attitudinal. In the words of David Thomson, Buñuel, despite his reputation for cold misanthropy, remains, “tolerant of human weakness.”[2] Buñuel provides us with tender comedy, which is especially evident in his later work but never completely removed from his anti-church films; his work laughs along with piteous but earnest attempts of men to leave a villa, eat a meal, or understand a woman. In contrast, in today's mindfucks little human compassion or tolerance can be found. Indeed, these films constitute a new version of the theater of cruelty. Thematically, they uniformly reject any social structure's ability to save us from our delusions. And in stylistically, in their cinematic technique, they seem to understand our desire to participate in the delusion. Our desire to be lied to.

The fundamental distinction between most earlier “surprise” movies and films like *Fight Club, Memento, Mulholland Drive, The Sixth Sense*, and *Donnie Darko* lies in the nature of the hero's identity. Tyler Durden, Leonard Shelby, Diane Selwyn, Malcolm Crowe, and Donnie Darko are all, to some degree, self-deluded. In the forerunners —The *Crying Game, Usual Suspects*, and especially Fincher's *Se7en* and *The Game*, all of the heroes (and the audience) are surprised to learn the truth about the level of manipulation effected by the other characters. Fergus discovers Dill's true sexuality. Both Dean Keaton and Dave Kujan are floored by the man they have known as Verbal Kint. In Fincher's two movies, the respectable heroes' solid worlds are broken to pieces, quite literally, at the climax. But in each case, the power to delude lies in another's hands. Each film's hero in these earlier works may play a key role—often as an enabler for the delusion—but none is the source of the delusion. Things have changed in today's mindfucks.

Fight Club: Unnamed through most of the film, Edward Norton plays a marginalized hero who first turns to support groups and self help slogans. He seems to "find himself" when he embarks on a path of destruction.

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Tyler Durden in David Fincher's *Fight Club* represents a radical departure from the traditional Fincher hero. In Fincher's earlier work, David Mills (*Se7en*) and Nicholas Van Orton (*The Game*) are successful, competent, aggressive individuals overwhelmed by the surrounding world and each has the confidence to believe that he can put a stop to the "game" that he is playing. Each is decidedly wrong.

Mills faces utter destruction and tragedy when his wife—and unborn child, the hope for the future—is brutally decapitated. Van Orton faces literal destruction as his body plummets through a plate glass ceiling. The fact that he does not die can leave a viewer even more depressed than at the end of *Se7en* if we realize that Nicholas has acted as a mere pawn, utterly predictable and therefore utterly devoid of free will. Both Mills and Van Orton have their humanity diminished as each is forced to confront the fact that he is powerless.

Not so for *Fight Club*'s Tyler Durden. He is a character of enormous power, able to bend the will of every man he meets. A visionary leader, he has the intelligence, charisma, and courage to enact his vision. This power, however, comes at the expense of his identity. For though Tyler is all-powerful, Jack (the narrator) remains largely powerless unless he is following Tyler's instructions. And Jack is powerless throughout most of the movie in the most personal matter—he does not know himself. Jack does not know that he is in fact Tyler.

In one sense, the ending of *Fight Club* is far more optimistic than the ending of *Se7en* or of *The Game* for it allows Jack to destroy Tyler, thereby attaining a level of power and control that he has never consciously known. But considering the immense psychic and physical cost, it seems a Pyrrhic victory at best. When Jack first learns the truth about his identity, he is not impressed or seduced by what he has accomplished but is terrified, which would be the logical reaction upon discovering your perception of your own identity has been horribly flawed. But at the climax, Jack achieves a rationality in the use of his newly-discovered power. Jack doesn't outfight Tyler, because he cannot. He outwills him.

We do not know whether Jack will die from the self-inflicted gunshot wound he suffers at the climax, but it is clear that Tyler is dead. This fight Jack might win. The final shot—Jack with arm around girlfriend, watching a spectacular display of fireworks—constitutes, to borrow Judith Butler's phrase, "an ironic hopefulness."[3] The "irony" derives from Tyler/Jack's bleeding from a potentially fatal gunshot wound to his head, and the "fireworks" coming from the multiple high rises he and his fascist group have blown up. Still, coming from a director known for his pessimism about our ability to control our environment, *Fight Club* surprisingly represents one of the more optimistic of the modern mindfucks.

That optimism in destruction ends up presciently foreshadowing at least one element of the events surrounding September 11th, 2001. As citizens of the United States struggled to understand how the loss of thousands of innocent lives could be celebrated in some circles of the Muslim world, the explanation offered by commentators and celebrants alike was that the shroud of powerlessness had been lifted when the towers came down. *Fight Club* sanitizes this issue by – rather unrealistically – destroying only property, and not taking innocent human life. But its essential point – that if men are not accorded at least some measure of control over their destinies, they will lash out violently, and in the view of the ruling class, immorally, at their perceived oppressors – appears most timely.

Continued: *Mulholland Drive*

On the phone is Diane, also seen as the aspiring actor, Betty. Something ugly always follows her.

Mulholland Drive uses death at its climax for a different effect. Like Jack, Diane Selwyn puts a gun into her mouth and blows her head off at the end of the film, not to defeat an unwanted part of her own personality but to relieve the unrelenting pressure that her own delusional madness has created. At this moment, she is attempting to escape an elderly couple's frantic attention. They possibly represent surrogate parents, although they look more like grandparents, and they predicted her stardom when she first arrived in Hollywood.

Diane plays dual roles (throughout most of the movie we have known her as the would-be starlet, Betty), and she is never given parents in the film. She has come to L.A. to live with an absent aunt and supposedly knows no one in town, but as Betty, she has no trouble making friends and winning support from the people she meets. People are genuinely nice to her at virtually every turn, but something ugly always follows her—an image literally visualized in an early scene behind the diner. In the end, we learn the "truth" about Diane/Betty: she is one of countless anonymous actresses who deals daily with the humiliation of not being the star she was supposed to be.

Camilla/Rita in *Muholland Drive* is an exaggeration of the starlet prototype, beautiful and helpless, a blank slate waiting to be scripted into any fantasy.

In Diane's fantasy of a life as Betty, responsibility for this failure is attributed to nameless old white men of power; they manipulate careers for their own profit and amusement, and they destroy beauty and art and personal freedom in the process. We never know if Betty's impressions are correct—Diane only offers the information that directors "didn't care for me."

But this vision of a woman's mental breakdown and its social causes certainly has been dealt with in feminist film theory. As an exemplar of that idea, *Mulholland Drive* goes farther than any movie since Marleen Gorris' *A Question of Silence* in suggesting that madness is the only logical option for a normal woman in such a destructively patriarchal society.

In Diane and Tyler we get both sides of the gender problem. Tyler— like Frank T.J. Mackey in *Magnolia*—appears to be sticking up overtly for men castrated by modern culture. (Many reviews of *Fight Club* alluded to Susan Faludi's book *Stiffed*) Diane appears to be speaking up somewhat less overtly for women who have their media-inspired dreams of glamor and happiness routinely squashed. Unlike the heroines in Jacques Rivette's *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), who find a measure of liberation in their trips into dramatic and romantic fantasy, Diane finds only madness.

Diane/Betty and Camilla/Rita in *Mulholland Drive* share adventures and identities. ...

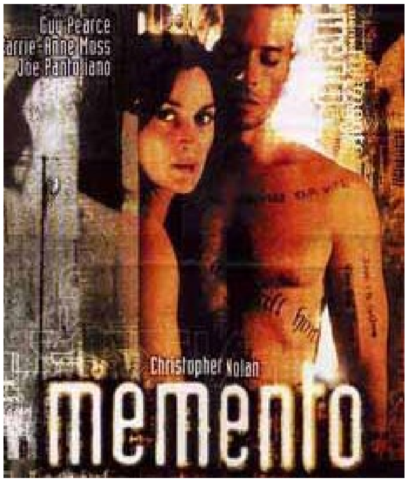
The common component that ties together Diane and Tyler (when he is in his more realistic "Jack" persona) is that both are powerless characters who resort to extraordinary self-delusion to bestow power upon themselves. They both live in the world of the anonymous extra, each serving as fodder for enormous corporate monoliths—the insurance industry in Tyler's case, and the Hollywood film industry in Diane's. Their solutions again recall Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble*, essential text of Queer Theory, analyzes gender identities as performance. Since society's overriding structures are so powerful, the best individuals like Tyler and Diane can hope for is to parody their traditional roles —Diane as the spunky starlet and Tyler as the man's man— and thereby achieve a small measure of freedom.

...and they also share kisses.

In *Memento*, the protagonist Leonard Shelby is by no means powerless but is defiant of that which has damaged him. Whereas the hatred displayed by Tyler and Diane appear to be directed at their social and economic superiors, Leonard's hatred, such as it is, appears to derive from a much more personal injustice. He wants to find the man who raped and murdered his wife. On one level, Leonard appears more innocent than even Jack or Betty. He has suffered short-term memory loss, and consequently he suffers pathetic humiliation at the hands of virtually everyone he meets.

Leonard Shelby in *Memento* relies on polaroid photographs and notes to himself to compensate for short term memory loss.

We are inclined to root for Leonard's vengeance, not just on the common criminals who murdered his wife, but also on the common people who abuse him for amusement and convenience. We are also apt to admire the way he has chosen to



Shelby appears manipulated by all of the other characters in the film, including Natalie.

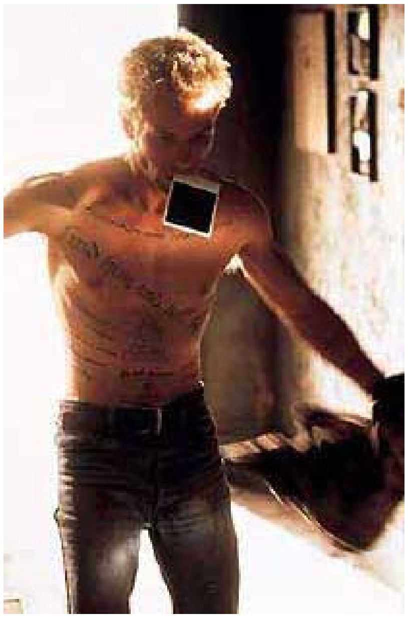
By the end of *Memento* we seem to learn that Leonard has been the primary manipulator.

cope—by removing emotion and intuition and relying on fact and logic. As the story progresses and develops its mindfuck theme, we come to understand that Leonard is not as innocent as we have been led to believe since he willfully ignores fact when it suits him. He can erase his own past in an act of outrageous audacity and will.

As viewers, we may conclude that Leonard is not simply an evil person and has committed murder various times motivated by something more than the desire to do harm; if so then we will most likely find that motivation in Leonard's guilt. But the script leaves it unclear whether Leonard feels personal guilt relating to his murder of his wife, or some larger socio-economic guilt over the ruthless service he provides to his employer. The script finally merges two stories, that of Sammy Jankis (Leonard's institutional guilt) and Leonard's wife (his personal guilt); at the end the two storylines are inseparable. Leonard has made a career out of rejecting the claims of people who entrusted his company with their health insurance. He functioned largely with impunity, just one small piece of a large beast.

But the residue of his insurance investigations have left their mark on his personality. His demons seem as powerful as compelling Tyler Durden's to subject himself to brutal physical and psychic beatings. Each protagonist has earned their living working behind the scenes to rob people of basic human rights. And each, like Diane Selwyn, has resorted to self-delusion in order to cope. What separates Leonard, and what makes him ultimately scarier that the others, is that he is better at fooling himself. Unlike Tyler and Diane, Leonard allows the delusional side to win.

Leonard, Tyler, and Diane are, on some level, destructive characters. However, and this is vitally important, all are presented in sympathetic terms. Their specific actions and motivations allow us to identify with them, indeed, often to root for them. The side of Tyler who is Jack protests the destruction that Tyler preaches. Jack attempts to rescue Marla. Even the destructive persona Tyler is very clear about not wanting to hurt any people.



He regularly has himself tattooed with crucial reminders to himself. Thus Leonard Shelby is a perfectly visualized postmodern hero.

GUY PEARCE CARRIE-ANNE MOSS JOE PANTOLIANO
MEMENTO

We understand Shelby's fragile identity only through his photos and his experiences, recounted backward.

The fifth rule of Fight Club is that when one fighter gives up, the fight is over.

The part of Diane that is Betty also acts nobly. Though anonymous extra Diane, we come to find, actually dreams of hurting the star Camilla, the Betty part of Diane actually walks away from a potentially career-making meeting in order to help save Rita, the helpless amnesiac who serves as Camilla's alternative personality.

Leonard's victims, except for his wife, are all of shady morality, if not outright criminals. Maybe the petty criminals and con men Leonard comes across did not deserve to be murdered, but none are completely innocent. You could certainly draw the conclusion that Leonard has done far worse deeds in the past as a claims adjuster when his victims were innocent.

The psychiatrist protagonist, Malcolm Crowe, in *The Sixth Sense* is a different sort of hero. He faces no internal battle for control over his heart and soul. Although depressed by his line of work and haunted by his failures, he remains well-intentioned, even desperate in his quest to help innocent people. And if Tyler Durden, Diane Selwyn, and Leonard Shelby can be identified with the broader social or economic structures of masculinity, feminism, and corporate consciousness, Malcolm Crowe's identity remains entirely personal. He is there to help kids, specifically one troubled kid named Cole Sear. In spite of this, Malcolm does share one overriding trait with Tyler, Diane, and Leonard: delusion about the nature of his identity.

The Sixth Sense concerns itself with personal relationships, not broad social truth. Prior to the

In *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm genuinely wants to help Cole overcome fear. By the end, the psychiatrist has his own terror to face.

The Sixth Sense: Malcolm and his wife confront a danger that attacks when he is most comfortable. He is at home, professional award in hand.

twist in which Malcolm discovers he is in fact dead, the most terrifying moments come in the scenes depicting people's utter inhumanity, especially the scene in which Cole is locked in the closet by his abusive classmates, and the scene in which a mother uses her nurturing authority to poison her own daughter. The evil presented in the movie does not derive from the child Cole's supernatural ability to see dead people, though that certainly scares him. The cruelty which the film presents, it is suggested, would exist regardless of any special talent on the part of the child. In fact, it is Cole's talent which becomes his salvation, as well as the salvation of the girl he saves.

At the end of the film, Malcolm's delusions have an enormously beneficial impact, owing in part to screenwriter M Night Shyamalan's twist on an established device. As previously noted, *La Riviere du Hibou* and *Jacob's Ladder* also place a hero in danger at the beginning, then go on to construct a plotline resulting from his survival. At the end of *Jacob's Ladder*, as in *The Sixth Sense*, we discover the hero did not in fact survive. It was an imagined life. (A "life not lived" to quote the final sentence of Anita Shreve's novel *The Last Time They Met,* a book which demonstrates that narrative plotlines based on mindfucks are not confined to celluloid.) Shyamalan's invention of Cole Sear allows Malcolm to continue to do good works, even after the psychiatrist's death. The horror with which Malcolm reacts to learning the truth does not diminish the value in his work.

Continued: *Donnie Darko*

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In the film *Donnie Darko* we do not learn how Donnie, the protagonist, reacts to his "truth." Of all the films I discuss here, this mindfuck film by first-time director Richard Kelly is possibly the most disturbing—and not coincidentally, most postmodern—because it can have the most interpretations. *Donnie Darko*'s plot device is similar to that of *The Sixth Sense*. The teenage hero Donnie suffers a near miss with fatality early in the story. At the end of the story, the script suggests that perhaps he did die in the accident, as in *The Sixth Sense*.

Donnie Darko: Donnie is happy here. Is that because he is dead?

However, we could also argue that Donnie has traveled back in time to change his "good" fortune at surviving—some sort of mind over matter suicide. Another interpretation is also suggested by the film's final shots, which offer evidence that Donnie did in fact die in the first draft of time, and that the subsequent drama has been imagined by his mother, unable to cope with her part in her son's tragedy. So many conflicting indications are suggested in *Donnie Darko* that the film virtually defies standard textual analysis of plot, character and theme.

Donnie Darko: The main character looks for answers in places that most of his friends and family miss. Here, a seemingly disturbed old woman may hold the key to all his questions.

Donnie differs from the other deluded heroes in two significant ways. First, the audiences learns early on that he is a schizophrenic, subject to a regime of both analysis and medication. At the story's outset he has ceased taking his medicine, which information gives viewers a logical explanation for the hallucinations Donnie hears and sees. Donnie is also a child, the only hero in the films under discussion who has parents. None of the other protagonists had a mother who could dream up a fantasy for her child, and thus contribute that kind of plotline.

Also, our sympathy for Donnie is manipulated. Before the accident affects him, Donnie is not particularly sympathetic. He is rude to his family, and he calls his mother a "bitch." He is not pleasant at the school bus stop. Our reaction to him at this point is apt to be mixed. We may not condemn him for such actions: teenagers in an audience may in fact admire his audacity and the parents of teenagers may see a sharply observed, realistic character. Donnie remains largely impotent and frightened.

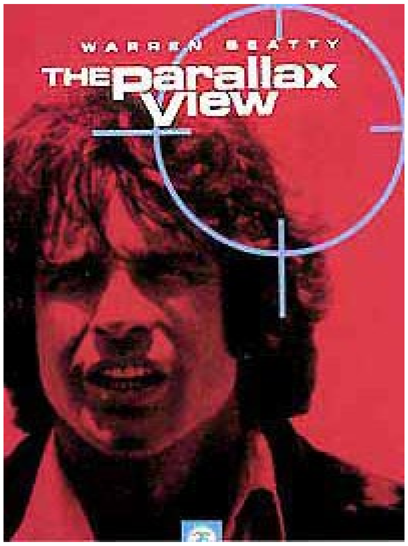
Donnie Darko: Surreal imagery wanders in and out of Donnie's existence.

That all changes after the accident. Donnie becomes far more sympathetic. He reveals his intelligence, bravery, and passion. He gets a friend in Frank and a girlfriend in Gretchen. He even seems to find that time travel may answer the questions of morality and free will which plague him. (This almost idealized version of Donnie's post-accident life, combined with his parents' ready acceptance of the virtue of those offering to help—the government which provides lodging after the accident, and the therapist who provides aid to Donnie—seem to support the interpretation of the plot that it is a mother's fantasy for her son.) Even his death is shown as positive. "When the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief because there will be so much to look forward to."

Political temperature can sometime explain the mindfuck. Public cynicism growing out of the McCarthy era set the stage for The *Manchurian Candidate* while....

Donnie Darko contains discussions about time travel, God, free will, education, and mental illness, and it also makes clear thematic references to child abuse, ageism, body type, and cultism. The film nearly collapses under the weight of its numerous ideas. At its thematic core is an issue most appropriate for a movie about a teenager—hypocrisy. Donnie is living through the last days of relative freedom in which he can explore the social world with impunity. Karen Pomeroy, an adult, gets fired for challenging the school system while Donnie merely gets suspended from after-school activities. Donnie experiences freedom from compromise, not having to surrender or be a hypocrite.

In the most astonishing sequence in the film, Donnie commits a supposedly evil and destructive act—burning down an innocent, albeit pompous and disingenuous, man's home. He commits this arson while his mother and father are with other school parents lavishing praise on Sparkle Motion, Donnie's younger sister's dance group. That grade school performance, with spandex and lipstick, comes as close to societally-accepted kiddie porn as we are going to see this side of Britney Spears. Later, the seemingly innocent man turns out to be an actual purveyor of child pornography, which plot development may strike some as too neat. In sum, Darko's plot indicates there is often little distinction between what we perceive as good and what we perceive as evil.

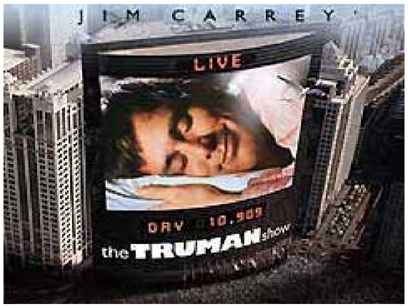


....similar public cynicism about Watergate led to The Parallax View.

Each of these movies may stimulate a range of emotional reactions from its audience, but the most typical audience reaction to any mindfuck movie is confusion. Given an audience's tendency to empathize with the hero, viewers likely experience confusion tinged with helplessness. Why, then, would popular films of the turn of the century elicit confusion and helplessness as such dominant emotions? It is easier to trace the cause and effect relation of, say, Watergate and Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View*, one of the great paranoid films in American cinema and a movie which even has an abstract short film within in it intended to serve as a diagnostic mindfuck. It is easier to draw a link between the McCarthy hearings and Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, filmed by John Frankenheimer in 1962.

Writer/director Andrew Niccol has explored the question of identity in stories set in the not-too-distant future, such as *Gattaca* ....

But no such obvious social event explains the current fascination with mindfuck plotlines. Social critics on the right consistently point out the breakdown in traditional values and loss of religious faith; on the left, critics examine the soul-devouring effects of capitalism and big-business. But the decline in religious faith and the power of wealth in the United States are hardly new conditions. They may be contributory, but they cannot be primary.



.... and *The Truman Show.*

Over the past several decades, philosophical debate over the nature of identity has taken on significant political and scientific dimensions. Questions about the moral implications of abortion, gene therapy, and cloning spotlight not only the question, "What is human life?" but also, "Who controls that life?" In this vein, Andrew Niccol has dramatized such questions in his film *Gattaca* (1997), as well as in his script for Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). In particular, *The Truman Show* develops a hero fundamentally deluded as to the very nature of his identity, a man who believes he is in control but is sadly mistaken. The fundamental difference between *The Truman Show* and the mindfuck films which have followed is that the former lets the audience in on the deception early on, making us identify more with the manipulators than the manipulated.

In this movie, the audience is let in on the secret of identity, but...

....but Truman Burbank, the hero, remains in the dark.

Jean Baudrillard has written,

> The disappearance of the referential universe is a brand new phenomenon.4

In writing about the skyrocketing debt facing the United States, Baudrillard supposes that we have begun to invent “parallel universes”; such universes are merely virtual representations of reality. Baudrillard finds that “virtual reality” has been one of the defining technical achievements of the late 20th century and now is a narcotic coping mechanism.

> It is simple enough to enter an exponential or virtual mode to become free of any responsibility, since there is no reference anymore, no referential world to serve as a measuring norm.5

Another story set in the future, Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil,* suggests that when real life is too horribly painful or....

This sense of artificiality and a virtual universe shaping a character’s life certainly seems to define the worlds that Tyler Durden, Malcolm Crowe, Diane Selwyn, Leonard Shelby, and Donnie Darko inhabit. Baudrillard’s conception of the simulacrum, the representation which has blurred ordinary “true” reality, finds astonishing voice in the worlds set up by these new Hollywood mindfucks. Fascinated by the escapism of U.S. theme parks, Baudrillard writes,

> Disney, the precursor, the grand initiator of imaginary as virtual reality, is now in the process of capturing all the real world to integrate it into its synthetic universe... At Disney World in Orlando, they are even building an identical replica of the Los Angeles Dinseyland.6

....too crushingly monotonous, fantasy and madness are reasonable

In the age of 24 hour-a-day news coverage, in the age of computer animation, in the age of “plausibly live” Olympic coverage—in an age in which anyone with a computer and a modem can run an internet search on himself and find any number of unknown identities—is it any wonder we find ourselves confused as to what is real and what is imagined? We are under siege from alternatives.

images. In what experiences can we place our trust?

Deconstructionism is a useful theoretical prism through which to view these questions of identity for it blurs the lines between supposed opposites. Whereas traditional narratives make it tempting to think that one conclusive truth must exist—e.g., that Malcolm Crowe is either dead or alive —deconstructionism suggests the possibility that neither is true and both are true. We often believe that what is real occupies a superior position over what is imagined. To a certain degree, past films also explored this issue; for example, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, highly controversial in its time, appeared to suggest that fantasy was superior to reality.

What is remarkable about current mindfuck films is that they do not seem to assign primacy to either reality or illusion; thus, they take fledgling steps toward a possible postmodern template for identity. Both the real and the imagined exist as fundamental conditions of modern life in the United States. Donnie Darko explains the philosophy quite succinctly when discussing Graham Greene's *The Destructor*:

> Destruction is a form of creation.

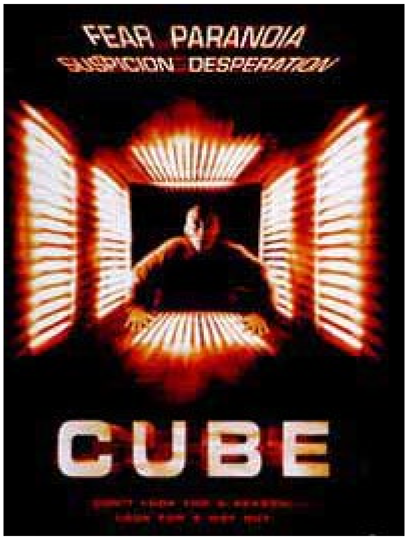
In social terms, the late 20th century has witnessed more destruction and creation than any other historical period, and now, in contemporary narratives, fiction has captured this process on film, tape, and disk.

Film may be uniquely qualified to explore this anxiety about what is real since it is the medium which authenticates "truth" today: things are no longer true if we read them in a book or hear them from a friend—they are true if we see them on film or tape. In addition, excepting those working in a Brechtian way, scriptwriters often use the characters' emotion states to create emotional reactions within audiences.

In this way, film provides a second generation for Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage." The French psychoanalyst identified a crucial step in an infant's development occurring when the child first looks into a mirror and thinks, "That is me." This confusion between the child's identity and the mere representation of identity as seen in the mirror is similar to, and perhaps the basis of, later identification with a fictional protagonist. On some level, we are apt to respond, “That is me.”

This is the basis for catharsis. We enjoy any displeasure we have experienced in following the film plot because we survive what we have experienced on screen, so that on some level, we have survived it in our “true” identities. If the characters on screen are deluded as to their identities, the mindfuck movies provide us with an opportunity to work out our own similar fears about self- delusion.

Continued: Postmodern cinema



Unlike later mindfucks, *Cube*'s characters are simplified archetypes. However, foreshadowing more recent films, *Cube*'s plot is postmodern in that it challenges the very notion of identity.

In *Waking Life*, the unnamed protagonist does what these heroes do best, contemplate existence.

But who do we trust to help us with this identity-affirming work? These films no longer pose questions such as, "Who can I trust to tell me the truth about society, or God, or my wife, or the Kennedy assassination?" Now the films make audiences ask, "Who can I trust to tell me the truth about my own identity?"

Seemingly we no longer can generate self-knowledge. Thematically, these films assume that we have ceded that responsibility—to politicians, doctors, Hollywood image makers, high priests on the pulpit, or advice texts on TV or in the self-help section of the bookstore. In this sense, what Baudrillard analyzes as the deletion of the referential universe results in our deleting our own identity.

Image-makers fill the resulting void, and these are the monsters hiding behind the dumpster behind the diner in *Mulholland Drive*. And film may an art form especially appealing to a fascistic artist, to a director or screenwriter who seizes the responsibility for psychic definition by controlling the viewer's eye and the ear, who manipulates what we believe and what we trust, who creates characters for us. I believe the monster behind the dumpster behind the diner in *Mulholland Drive* is someone like film director David Lynch. I also believe that Donnie Darko finds a portal to another dimension from a screen projecting the movie *The Evil Dead* because movies have the power to impress a new reality onto our brains in ways unsurpassed by any other medium.

Although film can "deconstruct" character quite easily, at best it can only flirt with a postmodern template for character. Baudrillard's claim for the disappearance of a referential universe in fact does not explain the mechanisms of audience response to mindfuck films and their development of their protagonists. In fact, most viewers of fiction film will arrive at some comfortable interpretation of what motivated the protagonist or of what happened in the plot. If Diane Selwyn is not Betty, then she is Diane.

Malcolm Crowe is either alive or dead.

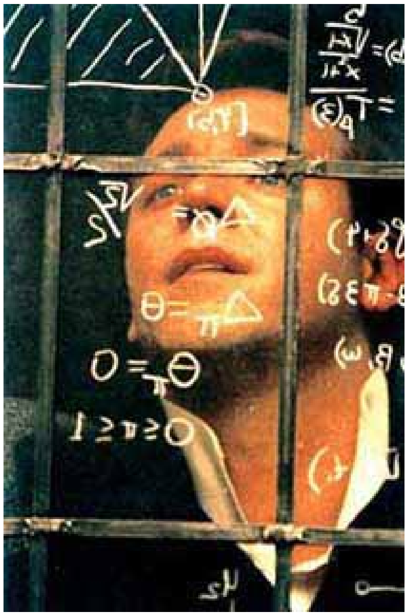
Waking Life's many characters engage in wide ranging discussions on existence. But their identities are not challenged

This either/or construction on the part of viewer response presupposes some identifiable center; in viewing the film, at a certain point in the plot, perhaps at the end of the film, we find some reference point allowing us to accept that we have been fooled; then we can move forward in our interpretation confident that the opposite of what we had believed is true. Postmodernism suggests that no such center exists, a disquieting and frightening notion.

Interestingly, the very physical process by which film creates its illusion of realistic motion provides an apt metaphor for the same philosophical problem. When those unacquainted with moving pictures see a film, their assumption is that the film stock itself must have a free-flowing collection of images which, when projected, create an image of continuous motion. People must be taught that film is indeed comprised of discreet static images, or frames, which are frozen on screen for a split second before being replaced by the next frame. They must learn about persistence of vision.

Hero David Aames wears a mask in *Vanilla Sky.*

Frames provide a physical structure for film. The frames themselves can be manipulated, or deconstructed, but they remain frames. They can split into sections, as in Jim Cunningham's "Fear/Love" motivational tapes in *Donnie Darko,* or be subliminally inserted into other texts, as in *Fight Club*. But they always remain frames. A more aptly postmodern, mindfuck script for *Fight Club* would not reveal that Jack and Tyler Durden are one in the same. It would reveal that the character we have come to know as Jack is not recognizable as anything or anyone. The plot would offer no underlying structure to clarify identity.



Perhaps the most postmodern image in recent film comes in the final shot of Vincenzo Natali's 1997 thriller *Cube*. After all the debates the characters, and the audience, engage in about the nature of the world and the power structures that control it, a door opens onto a vast terrain of blinding white light. An overwhelmed innocent steps out into this all-encompassing "reality." It can be a terrifying image. At least the Starchild from Stanley Kubrick's *2001* promised rebirth. *Cube*— like the most prophetically postmodern of classic tragedies, *Macbeth* —appears

A Beautiful Mind is based on the life of a real life mathematician, John Nash, who is overcome by schizophrenia and then gets it under control, though he never banishes it.

to promise nothing. But *Cube* has a plotline concerned with the structure of society, not with the structure of identity. Viewers may find it easier to accept that they cannot identify social forces than to accept that the "individual" cannot be identified. In a sense, our desire to recognize ourselves makes a truly post-modern identity film more difficult.

It might be argued that another film from 2001 achieves this more fully than any of the five films thus far discussed. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* appears to be concerned with all of these issues around identity. The plotline very clearly follows one of the mindfuck templates described earlier. An unnamed hero suffers a possibly fatal accident early on, then awakens into a dream world of philosophical conversation and exploration. This hero begins to assume late in the movie that this dream state may be death. The closing image in which he floats off into the air like a helium balloon does little to confirm or deny this interpretation.

A Beautiful Mind's script reveals the mindfuck secret midway through.

Waking Life has only a philosophical discussion for dialogue, so in that dialogue postmodernism is addressed directly, as is existentialism, lucid dreaming, and a wide range of other concepts of existence. In its scope, the film's themes surpass even *Donnie Darko*. Yet in the way that it treats the characters' emotions or addresses audience processes of identification, *Waking Life* hardly seems concerned with identity but rather treats its characters as mechanisms of thought. With very few exceptions, its characters do not come close to offering full and complete identities. Though the characters express a passion for intellectual curiosity, scarcely another human emotion is worked in the script.

A Beautiful Mind is finally about waging a personal struggle against mental illness. This storyline wins favor with popular audiences and helps the

The few times other emotions are expressed in *Waking Life*, they tend to be destructive, as with the two gunmen in the bar, or the Red Man in jail. Interestingly, these are among the only narrative scenes in the movie. These characters relate anecdotes and tell stories about what has happened or what will happen. And the characters engaged in narratives all come to unpleasant ends. Virtually every other character speaks about human life theoretically.

As a viewer, I found the characters who spoke narratives and their unpleasant fates far more film win an Oscar for Best Picture.

The Others: Mindfuck films with women protagonists often develop the theme of female madness.

The Others: Women are required to work within the prescribed social system. Here protagonist Grace Stewart faces madness in defense of her family.

interesting than the basic Cliff Notes version of philosophical history spoken by the professors and thinkers throughout the movie. This is the case even though, as in most of Linklater's compelling work, it his distrust of traditional narrative that gains critical attention for being his most original contribution to feature fiction film. In sum, *Waking Life* may include identity in its characters' broad discourse on existence, but identity is not its chief concern.

Donnie Darko comes the closest to presenting a true postmodern conception of character. The plot offers too many possible answers to the question, “Where is Donnie?”—as seen in a note on the refrigerator at the beginning of the story. And the plot give too many possible answers to the question, “Who is Donnie?” The other movies may make us pose questions about how we conceive our own identities, but they seem to provide structures to answer those questions. Of course, the actual meaning of any provided “answer” within the plot development is open for debate.

It should come as no surprise that of all the characters discussed in Hollywood's recent midfuck films, only two, Diane Selwyn and Grace Stewart, are women. Perhaps more significantly, not a single director or writer of any recent mindfuck movie has been a woman. (Sylvia Nasser's book about John Nash formed the basis of *A Beautiful Mind*, but the screenplay was written by Akiva Goldman.) This is not so unusual for Hollywood, where the vast majority of producers, directors, and screenwriters have always been males.

Throughout Hollywood history, neither sex has held a monopoly on characters who slide into delusion. Examinations of delusional characters have often been relegated to sub-genres, so we tend to find deluded men like Victor Frankenstein in a horror film (*Frankenstein*, James Whale, 1931) and deluded women like Virginia Stuart in melodrama (*The Snake Pit*, Anatole Litvak, 1948). Traditionally, male characters have been allowed far more latitude in reworking reality to their liking than have the women.

The classic Hollywood hero, as defined in countless Westerns and action/adventure films, recognizes some flaw in a social order and then acts to correct that flaw. From John Wayne on, the male hero has been permitted to step outside the boundaries of society and is recognized as heroic for doing so. Tyler

The Sixth Sense: Unlike most mindfuck heroes, Malcolm in the end is a positive force, able to help Cole. He has to face the same kind of horror at his own identity as do the other mindfuck heroes, but the film ends more hopefully than most . Perhaps his transcendence accounts for the film's great success.

Durden, Leonard Shelby, and Donnie Darko are all destroyers, and each of them achieves some measure of triumph in that destruction.

The same cannot be said for Diane Selwyn. In traditional Hollywood film, women are required to work within the flawed social system, relying on what are seen as feminine wiles to achieve any triumph. Consequently, madness for a woman can never be heroic. Grace Stewart in *The Others* comes about as close as a woman can come, precisely because her madness derives from her resolutely clinging to her family. The ending of *The Others* is by no means happy, but at least Grace has found a place and a purpose. *Mulholland Drive*'s Diane Selwyn, who has no family in the film, is not granted even that level of comfort by the plot.

The preponderance of male heroes in today's mindfucks (in tandem with the preponderance of male directors and screenwriters of such movies) may suggest something beyond institutional Hollywood sexism. Perhaps male protagonists are better suited to this role of facing identity confusion (and male storytellers more interested in narrating this construction) precisely because men have been the traditionally dominant gender.

If the underlying idea in these movies is the fear that we cannot trust ourselves to know ourselves, such an idea would strike more acutely at those who have previously had the highest degree of confidence. Film has consistently told women that they are incapable of independence, that they are defined by those around them, by their men and their families. But for men, who have been schooled to believe in their own individual ability to see clearly and act accordingly, the idea of the mindfuck can be all the more devastating.

Finally, all five of these movies seem to suggest that self-imposed delusion may be a valid alternative to reality. Even in *Fight Club*, which ends with the destruction of the illusory character at the hands of the real character, we must recognize the tremendous service that illusory Tyler Durden has provided for the real Tyler. Fantasy has given meaning to the real.

But another recent movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, which shares a structural similarity with these five movies states a clear preference for reality over fantasy, a far more palatable conclusion in a culture which elevates reason over imagination. Not surprisingly and perhaps because of that kind of resolution, this movie won an Oscar as the Best Picture of 2001 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.

Although the mindfuck in *A Beautiful Mind* functions differently than the mindfucks in these other movies, it has the same narrative structure. The audience, along with the hero, John Nash, is tricked into believing in a reality which is ultimately proven false. Yet the plot differs in timing and message. We learn the truth about John Nash at the film's midpoint rather than toward the end. (The other movies either reveal the truth at the end of the second act or in the climax.)

And John Nash learns to defeat his delusions in a positive manner. Malcolm Crowe, Diane Selwyn, and Donnie Darko appear to be dead at the end of their movies. The "ironic hopefulness" at *Fight Club*'s conclusion leaves Tyler Durden's status open-ended. And Leonard Shelby simply allows the delusion to win out. *A Beautiful Mind* offers far more optimism about our ability to overcome our delusions. Perhaps that partially explains why it won such a prestigious award. But it used the same device to reveal its story that these other mindfucks did. It simply left us in a safer, more comfortable place after it was done with us.

Continued: Notes

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Notes

1 From 1959-1964, Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* repeatedly employed the mindfuck device. In at least a dozen episodes, concentrated largely in its first season, *The Twilight Zone* offered plots in which characters were deluded about the nature of their existences. In *The Hitchhiker*, a woman believes she has survived an accident only to discover she has in fact died. Similarly, in *Perchance to Dream*, a man has an entire adventure in the space of his last moment alive. In *Judgement Night* and *The Passerby*, (a weaker episode very much like Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others*), characters do not know they are dead. In other episodes, characters were unaware of their true physical nature, like in *The Lateness of the Hour*, in which a woman discovers she is a robot. In probably the best of these constructions, *The After Hours*, a woman does not learn until the end that she is in fact a mannequin.

2 Thomson, David. *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*. New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. pg. 98.

3 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble* (10th Anniversary Edition). New York: Routledge, 1999.

4 Baudrillard, Jean. *Global Debt and Parallel Universe*. Trans by Francois Debrix.
Website: http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/globaldebt.html. April, 2003.

5 Ibid.

6 Baudrillard, Jean. *Disneyworld Company*. Trans by Francois Debrix.
Website:
http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/disneyworld.html. April, 2003.

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“Pansies don't float”– gay representability, film noir, and *The Man Who Wasn’t There*

by Vincent Brook and Allan Campbell

The film’s title casts a drop shadow on the phallic barber’s pole.

“Pansies Don't Float”: The explicitly gay Creighton Tolliver’s (Jon Polito) submerged corpse, with his toupee floating off.

Cracking the case: The plate glass window in Big Dave’s (James Gandolfini) office fissures as he attempts to strangle Ed

> While independent, foreign, and crossover films offer complex and challenging images of gays and lesbians, mainstream Hollywood has progressed at a slower pace than many assume. The number of big-budget, wide-release films with substantive gay themes, characters, and content remains alarmingly small, although the number of secondary, “incidentally queer” characters has risen dramatically.
> —Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*

> I am something in the nature of a film editor emeritus, and brothers Joel and Ethan Coen are self-styled cinéastes who had begun shooting this, with little concern to what it might be called. *Pansies Don’t Float* was an early working title that, thank goodness, they were prevailed upon to discard.
> —Roderick Jaynes, introduction to the published screenplay *The Man Who Wasn’t There*

Roderick Jaynes is the pseudonym employed by the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen to disguise the editing of the films they otherwise produce, direct, and write together under one or both of their given names. The use of this fictive persona (a source that dares not speak its name) in regard to the neo-noir ultimately

Crane (Billy Bob Thornton). Crane ends up knifing him in the neck in self defense.

Garrulous principal barber Frank (Michael Badalucco)...

...and tight-lipped second chair Ed Crane. The two barbers are members of a rare public profession that sanctions male-on-male intimacy, both physically and in conversation, and across a range of the population.

Modern man: As Crane passes among the people of Santa Rosa, he carries “secrets bigger even than

released as *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001) is doubly ironic. Here it foregrounds a similar subterfuge of identification in the film itself, a subterfuge that has gone largely unnoticed or at least not remarked on in the discourse surrounding the film.[1]

As for the working title, “*not* to float” suggests submersion, something kept beneath the surface, and what in a Hollywood film is more likely treated as submerged (“subtextual,” if you will) than the representation of a homosexual? Yet “Pansies Don’t Float,” like “Roderick Jaynes,” both shrouds and reveals, for, as we will show, more than one “pansy” (beyond the secondary character openly disclosed as homosexual) lurks beneath the surface of *The Man Who Wasn’t There*. Besides “outing” none other than the film’s protagonist, and assessing the significance of his “closeted” gayness, this essay will analyze the relation of homosexual submersion to film noir as a genre specifically, and to the issue of “gay representability” in American commercial cinema as a whole.

The absent cause: plotting *The Man Who Wasn’t There*

The year: 1949. The place: the northern California town of Santa Rosa (last seen, most memorably, in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1942 noir classic *Shadow of a Doubt*). The protagonist: pathologically passive, atypically reticent barber Ed Crane (played by Billy Bob Thornton). Stoical victim of a deadening job and a cuckolded marriage, Crane hatches a plot to blackmail his cuckolder, Big Dave Brewster (played by James Gandolfini), into coughing up the $10,000 Crane needs to get in on the ground floor in the dry-cleaning business.

The scheme backfires ferociously. Big Dave uncovers the plot and tries to strangle Crane, who knifes Big Dave in the neck in self-defense. Crane’s wife Doris (played by director Joel Coen’s wife, Frances McDormand) is falsely accused of Big Dave’s murder and ends up committing a “double murder” in prison —of herself and her unborn child conceived with Big Dave. Crane tries to redeem himself by boosting the career of a gifted teenaged pianist Birdy (Scarlett Johansson), but this plan runs aground when the two are nearly killed in a car accident. Crane recovers the one about what really happened.”

“Muscle Power”: The image of a male hunk adorns Crane’s prison cell desk...

...and also the wall of the barber shop.

from the accident but ultimately is sent to the death house for a crime he didn’t commit: the murder of Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), the gay traveling salesman who had inspired Crane’s dry-cleaning scheme and whom homophobic Big Dave had beaten and drowned. This bizarrely tragic series of events, which would send most people down a sinkhole of despair, leads to an odd form of redemption for Crane. Believing that he has been singled out by aliens and will be spirited away by flying saucer, Crane accepts his state-sanctioned electrocution with beatific calm.

As with most film noir and neo-noir, *The Man Who Wasn’t There*’s expressionist visual style vies for attention with its convoluted crime story if not trumping it altogether (Bergan 95). In the hands of the Coen brothers, this cinematic “excess” is both heightened through the brothers’ postmodern self-consciousness and transposed through their quirkily mordant humor. The film is shot in the obligatory black and white of classical noir and features noir’s favored chiaroscuro lighting and atmospheric mise en scene. It is set in a time period contemporary to the genre’s heyday of the mid-1940s through mid-1950s and is rife with allusions to notable noirs such as *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Scarlet Street*, *Asphalt Jungle*, *Out of the Past*.

The mood is sullen and murky. The worldview, filtered through the shadowy lens of the main character, is laden with alienation and anomie. Yet an “incredible lightness,” the Coen “touch,” permeates the noir haze. Much of this emanates from the cheeky construction of the ambivalent protagonist, Ed Crane, whose taciturn personality seems as incongruously attuned to his role of voice-over narrator (another classical noir referent) as it is to his barber’s profession.

A more mundane, less “cinematic” occupation is barely imaginable. Notwithstanding the metaphoric connection to “cutting,” the job as barber is static, sedentary, un*event*ful, all talk and no action—and, in Crane’s case, at least diegetically, not even talk. Yet, for the psychological, interior, *hidden* conceits of film noir, the combination of immobility and muteness turns out to be not a bad match after all. Indeed, when the sexual orientation that dares not speak its name is added to the mix, the seeming incongruity becomes a coup. Barbering is one of the few public professions in which a man is not only allowed but encouraged to touch—in a sense, to fondle—other men, indeed the whole range of the male population, with no gay stigma attached.

In the other major socially sanctioned male-on-male occupation, contact sports, while sexual overtones are certainly in abundance, the range of maleness is more limited and the physical contact more aggressive. Compared to a man's pinning another down or knocking him cold, cutting a man's hair connotes a kinder, gentler homoeroticism. Beyond the physical closeness it engenders, barbering also entails a certain kind of intimacy in conversation. Of course, in Crane's case, conversation is precisely the part of his job description that is missing—an absent cause pointing to a graver lack in both Crane and *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

Continued: The desire that wasn't there: outing Ed Crane

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The desire that wasn't there: outing Ed Crane

"What kind of *man* are you?!" Frank slugs Crane in the courtroom while he asks the film's big question.

Billy Bob's "first gay scene": Crane reacts with relative calm...

...to Tolliver's "come-on" in the cheap hotel.

Despite the film's glorious black-and-white, intertextual pastiche, sardonic wit and cinematic razzmatazz, an initial viewing of *The Man Who Wasn't There* might leave one with a nagging suspicion that less is there than meets the eye, until one proceeds from the assumption that Ed Crane is a repressed homosexual. This inference adds considerable resonance to the film both textually and generically. Textually, a gay strand enhances the complexity of a character whose extreme passivity remains otherwise unexplored and whose hyper-alienation from society and himself is explained solely (by his defense attorney) in terms of his paradigmatic status as "modern man."

Generically, such a character evokes not only classical film noir's "obsession," in Frank Krutnik's words, "with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement"; it also relates to the genre's tendency to address this obsession "through an intricate play of evasion, dissimulation, and transmutation, rather than in any direct manner" (xii, xiii).[2]

The *neo-noir* twist in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, however, is also twofold. First, the gay element in the film, befitting the post-Production Code conditions of its release, is more overtly expressed than in noirs past. Unlike Parker Tyler's (1947) Freudian, and Claire Johnston's (1978) Lacanian, queer readings of *Double Indemnity* (1944), for example, the uncovering of a gay subtext in *The Man Who Wasn't There* relates, in David Bordwell's terms, to its *implicit* rather than *symptomatic* meaning. Second, unbefitting a post-Stonewall, post-*Ellen* era in which gay visibility is "all the rage" (Walters), why should it still require an epiphany to disclose queerness at the heart of a recent neo-noir—or any contemporary film for that matter? Much less, why would such an epiphany be so rare that among all the individuals consulted and (150-odd) reviews scanned for this essay—gay and straight, professional and lay—none but *The Nation*'s Stuart Klawans has arrived, without prompting, at a similar conclusion?

The Desire that Wasn't There: Crane plays eunuch...

And even Klawans isn't sure that what he sensed is substantiated by the text. Subheaded "Department of Rorschach Testing," Klawans' article leaves open the possibility that his retrospective interpretation of Crane as "a deeply closeted gay man" might in the end be idiosyncratic:

> [A]s I look back on it, blinking my eyes, I keep seeing something that seems to be going unmentioned....I may be Rorschaching; but I still think there's a there in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (45).[3]

...to his wife Doris (Frances McDorman) at the bathtub....

What, then, is the textual evidence supporting Klawans' guarded, and this essay's less equivocal, imputation of "deeply closeted" gayness to Ed Crane? In retrospect, it is quite considerable. Starting with the film's ending and moving backwards, an accretion of story elements, details of character, and aspects of the mise en scene point to Crane's divergence from normative constructions of masculinity:

...A male prison guard returns the favor...

- The magazine for which Crane has written his account of the tragic events that have landed him on death row, he tells us three times, is a *men's* magazine.

- A copy of one such magazine, *Muscle Power*, with a flexing hunk on the cover, lies displayed on his prison cell desk (remindful of a wall poster of a body builder glimpsed earlier in the barber shop).[4]

- Crane's boss and brother-in-law, Frank (Michael Badalucco), shouts three times at Crane in court—echoing the earlier, twice-uttered complaint of Crane's wife's boss and lover, Big Dave— "What kind of *man* are you!"

- Crane refuses sex from the precocious teenager, Birdy, to whom he is strongly attracted but apparently only platonically ("sentimentally," in Klawans' words).

...before Crane is electrocuted.

The text compensates for its reticence about homosexuality through excess in characterization. Creighton Tolliver's ridiculous wig, not coincidentally, covers his "lack."

- Crane not only admits to not having "performed the sex act" with his voluptuous wife Doris "for several years," but he earlier seems as curiously unaffected by his own celibacy as by Doris's affair with Big Dave. ("I wasn't going to prance about it," Crane tells us. "It's a free country.")

- The stiletto-like letter opener with which Crane kills Big Dave in self-defense is referred to by Crane's lawyer, Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), as a "dame's weapon."

- Crane tells us that a couple of weeks after they met on a blind date (in what would have been the late 1930s or early 1940s!), Doris proposed to *him*.

- One of Crane's in-laws asks Doris at a wedding reception of Doris' cousin: "How come you got no kids?"

- Doris, for her part, is unperturbed at finding Crane alone with Birdy at a party at Big Dave's department store.

- A man approaches Crane at the party and asks out of the blue: "Haven't I seen you up in Ladies Wear?"

- Instead of gaining more traditional "tough guy" revenge on Big Dave—who himself later says, "I'd understand if you came in here and socked me in the nose!"—Crane secretly scams him out of $10,000.

- When the salesman and future murder victim, Creighton Tolliver, subtly tries to seduce him, Crane not only discerns the "pass" instantly, but turns it down with surprising nonchalance—especially for a small-town "straight" male in the United States of the late 1940s. Moreover, he proceeds to consummate their business deal rather than reject "the goddamn pansy" (as Big Dave calls him) out of hand.

- Crane visits Tolliver in a cheap hotel because Crane, even when earlier shaving his naked wife's legs, can't stop thinking about...dry cleaning. ("It's clean...and no shrinkage.")

- In the context of their asexual relationship, Doris treats her husband like the house eunuch, having him zip up her dress as she puts on her make-up and shave her legs while she reads in the bathtub (a ritual that is homoerotically—and sado-masochistically—reversed in the end when a male prison guard shaves Crane's legs as he sits strapped to the electric chair).

- Crane was rejected for military service in World War II, Doris snickers, "on account of fallen arches."

- Crane's barber occupation: the one thing in his life, he will tell readers of the men's magazine, about which he "felt remorse."

- Crane's name: an intertextual reference to *Psycho*'s Marion Crane that also alludes, as in Hitchcock's film, in a "femininely" symbolic sense to birds. The feminine aspect is reinforced in *Man* through the rhyme of Crane's platonic love, Birdy.

- The film's title.

- The film's early working title.

Identifying the "there" in *The Man Who Wasn't There* only takes us part way, however. Just as critical to an understanding of Crane's character as his gayness is its repressed nature, which problematizes the terms of its representation in the film. In describing the affectless barber as "*deeply* closeted," Klawans is extending "closeted" beyond its common usage of someone who, despite conscious awareness of his or her taboo desires, is unwilling to disclose them publicly. Ed Crane, Klawans and we are saying, is unwilling to admit his desires *even to himself*. Klawans explains,

> [The film] is perfectly, elegantly reticent about its subject matter, as suits both the theme and the tradition of film noir (a type of filmmaking that thrives on unstated motives) (45).

Strictly speaking, of course, *The Man Who Wasn't There* is not a film noir, but a neo-noir. This is an especially apposite distinction for a film that turns on the notion of conscious awareness. The term neo-noir emerged in the 1980s to describe a body of dark, sexually tinged crime films that exhibited much of the defining visual, narrative, and thematic traits associated with classical noir, yet which diverged crucially in one respect: the filmmakers' noir consciousness (Silver and Ward; Erickson; Naremore[5]).

Another of *Man*'s noir twists, then, is that a prime focus of its generic *hyper*-awareness is the hyper-*un*awareness of its main character. Crane's motives may go unstated in classical noir fashion; but atypically for either classical or neo-noir, the motives' "unstatedness" is both loudly proclaimed and much of the point. This "contradiction in terms" is literalized in narrator Crane's opening comment, "I don't talk much," as he proceeds to talk us through the entire lengthy and convoluted story. The subsequent tale abounds in allusions to veiled truths and patent deceit:

- to "dirty little secrets" and "secrets bigger even than the one about what really happened";

- to the Uncertainty Principle and "the meaning behind facts that have no meaning";

- to things "making less sense the closer you look" and there being "no 'what happened'" because "looking at something changes it";

- to "things going *deep*" and of "some greater scheme than the State has yet to uncover"**;**

- to Beethoven's "never having heard" the piano sonata Birdy plays for Crane "except in his head";

- to Crane's telling the story "step by step" yet not being able to "see any pattern in it";

- and to finally being able "to tell [in the afterlife, or in some sublime alien realm] all those things they don't have words for here."

One explanation for the overdetermined subtextuality of Crane's repressed homosexuality is the postmodern penchant for ironic self-consciousness the Coen brothers so self-consciously purvey. Another is to be found in Foster Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map to Neo-Noi*r. Hirsch suggests that the treatment of homosexuality is problematic in both classical noir and neo-noir. In classical noir, given the Hays Code's prohibitions against sexuality generally but even more severely against homosexuality,

> homosexuality was strictly confined to

> subtextual currents the audience wasn't supposed to, and often didn't, notice.

In neo-noir, gayness, though no longer a proscribed subject, still leads

> within the context of the psychological and erotic thriller…to a moral quicksand.

If classical noir's disguised sexuality was marked as dirty and sinful, how much more "disruptive and dangerous" is the noir homosexuality that is blatantly exposed? Homosexuality and noir are invariably a "bad match," Hirsch concludes, because in almost every instance in which homosexual behavior appears,

> it has been branded, as the noir narrative element, the source of aberrant and criminal behavior (205).

The idea that transgression need not be regarded regressively, indeed quite the opposite, is a mainstay of structuralist and poststructuralist theory. However, Hirsch's point is that, given their status as an oppressed minority with a dearth of representation in general, homosexuals are better off with no images at all than with ones that deride them.

Continued: Gay representability

Gay representability

There when it counted—Billy Bob helped Ellen DeGeneres make history. He was a guest on *Ellen*'s epochal 1997 "coming out" episode.

TIME
Yep, I'm Gay
EXCLUSIVE: Ellen DeGeneres explains why she's coming out
The changing nature of sex on TV

About *Time*: Ellen proclaims her queerness.

The term *visibility* and its corollary, *invisibility*, have been enduring ones for understanding the homosexual in society. They occur from the seminal socio-cultural discourse of the early-Cold War period that forms the backdrop for *The Man Who Wasn't There* (to be discussed below) through recent critical surveys written from a proudly queer perspective. Such surveys include Larry Gross' *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* and Suzanna Danuta Walters' *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*—both published, coincidentally, within weeks of *The Man Who Wasn't There*'s release in 2001. Yet one needs to treat the notion of visibility with skepticism for it risks implying ideological transparency. More specifically, it fails to acknowledge that the very idea of the *homosexual* (or *gay*, or *queer*, etc., each term used to articulate common political interests of particular people at particular times) is grounded in representation (D'Emilio; Foucault; Vidal; Weeks; et al.).

A more nuanced term, both textually and ideologically, is *representability*. Adapted from Patricia White's study of lesbian representation under Hollywood's classical studio system, the term representability suggests both the *ability* to represent something and the available *means* with which to do it, given the interdependent constraints of ideology, aesthetics and commerce. From the standpoint of gay male representability, therefore, one might wonder whether the (homosexual) man wasn't (accessibly represented as) there, because pansies don't (have much opportunity to) float (to the surface of mainstream recognition, let alone acceptance). This supposition remains dependent, of course, on the commercial viability of the particular choices in representation. In other words, can a film—even of the so-called independent, art-house variety —win over a gay and gay-friendly audience while evading widespread homophobic rejection? If so, what heterosexist assumptions will the filmmakers avoid challenging, and what issues will the viewer be able to avoid with little effort?

In examining gay representability in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, we find that the lone explicitly queer character, Creighton Tolliver, is relegated to a supporting role without much time on screen. Yet Tolliver obtains textual "compensation" through excess in his characterization and also through narrative excess. He has a farcically vain manner and garish appearance, topped by a ridiculous wig that, not coincidentally, covers his "lack." Also, his shady dealings propel the story on its tragic trajectory to blackmail, murder, and beyond.

The terms of Crane's gay representability are the complete inverse. As the film's protagonist and its literal storyteller, he not only appears in but supplies voice over commentary for every scene. However, his diegetic "presence" is conveyed precisely *through* lack: long silences, understated gestures, overdetermined asexuality, and passivity that verges on the paralytic. If perceived as something in need of deciphering, the mystery of Crane's (homo)sexuality can enhance the nominal suspense of what his blackmail (for money) and eventual killing of his wife's lover (in self-defense) will mean for him and the people in his life. But it is not essential for understanding the basic outline of the story.

The "payoff" of understanding the crimes and their outcomes is rendered explicitly. That of gleaning the protagonist's deeper motivations is left to a viewer's willingness to infer representation from action, inaction, sound and spectacle, connecting the dots to make a portrait that satisfies his or her need for a sufficiently legible representation. Such a spectatorial need, in turn, is influenced by the viewer's level of sympathy for the leading man, the auteur filmmakers, the noir homage, or any combination thereof. As the focal point in the narrative's unfolding, Ed Crane is as gay as one wants or needs him to be.

Seen in this light, we can find our own earlier attribution of Bordwellian *implicitness* to Crane's repressed homosexuality problematic. Alexander Doty has challenged the viability of relegating queer meanings to the level of connotation and subtext. He suggests that overvaluing such "privileged readings" among cineastes or academics leads to

Angelina Jolie as Lisa Rowe in *Girl, Interrupted*, with Winona Ryder.

Angelina Jolie and husband, Billy Bob Thornton. She says of her relationship with him, "If Billy was a woman, then I'd be a lesbian. If I was a man, we'd be a gay couple."

MULHOLLAND DRIVE
UN FILM DE DAVID LYNCH

The Movie Mom disapproves of the lesbian encounter in *Muholland Drive* (2001) underestimating the persistent obliviousness or resistance to such interpretations among the population at large. Still, in a society that stigmatizes far more erotic discourses than it indulges, one needs to acknowledge that some sexual representations are designed to be less determinate than others, allowing for plausible deniability to the easily offended.

Richard Maltby notes the tradition of "Hollywood's contradictory refusal to enforce interpretive closure at the same time as it provides plot resolution" to multiply address different kinds of viewers (349). As an example, he points to the strategic use of dissolves at a critical juncture in the 1942 film *Casablanca* that suggest that Ingrid Bergman's character only potentially sleeps with her former lover (Humphrey Bogart)— although by the narrative's conclusion, more legibly and predictably, she and her husband (Paul Henreid) are reunited and reconciled. The text's very indeterminacy, Maltby extrapolates, is inseparable from the ideology of the commercial aesthetic, and to the degree that a film has obvious meanings, they are the ones least likely to challenge the status quo.

However, as described by Tony Bennett, intertextual relations can suggest the frames of reference that shape meanings at a given historical moment, and in film interpretation, these remain the wild cards. Intertextual relations may represent broader shifts in the general ideological climate of reorganized aesthetic norms, or simply changes in a given celebrity's public image. When Bergman retained a relatively innocent star persona, her character's fidelity in *Casablanca* seemed plausible, but when the actress had an adulterous affair with Italian director Roberto Rossellini a few years after the film's release, some fans felt that they, like her actual husband, had been betrayed.

Of course, much has changed in the six decades between the releases of *Casablanca* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*. In the New Hollywood tradition of the artful genre pastiche (Neale; Bordwell 1985), self-conscious intertextual allusion is the name of the game. Now filmmaking constraints are more imposed by the filmmakers themselves than dictated by industrial norms. In *Man*, for example, shadowy sets and black-and-white photography, once necessitated by low budgets, are now daringly employed by "independent" auteurs in defiance of contemporary commercial aesthetics and even fiscal conservatism, as color film stock has become more readily and cheaply available.[6]

At the same time, even with Hollywood's Classification and Ratings system supplanting the old Production Code, some subjects may still only be represented with relative explicitness to earn an industry rating no stronger than an R (Restricted to Adults) in exchange for wide distribution (theatrically as well as in the markets of television and video). Certainly, in *Man*, the Coen brothers take some representational latitude: occasional nude display, off-color remarks, and ethno-racial epithets. Yet even this makes the moments of coyness, such as the film's "reticence" on sexual matters, seem like affectionate tributes to the classical period and the more explicit moments seem more courageous than they would otherwise seem in a contemporary film. At the same time, some of the same ideological pressures, at least regarding gay representability, continue to influence the film's signifying practices.

No major scandal has yet befallen the cast members of *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Of course, with the changes in ideological climate since the 1960s, the criteria for what constitutes a scandal have also changed. Nonetheless, some interesting "confabulation" (David Alan Black's term for the body of media and interpersonal speculation generated by film texts) has attached itself to *Man*. Its star, Billy Bob Thornton, was "there" at an historic moment in queer representability. He makes an uncredited cameo as a grocer in the 1997 television episode of *Ellen* that features the title character coming to terms with her sexual orientation. In that same episode, Laura Dern, with whom Thornton was romantically linked at the time, plays the desirable lesbian who prompts Ellen's revelation.

Since his relationship with Dern ended, Thornton was married until very recently to actress Angelina Jolie, who has publicly described herself as bisexual, an admission that now seems more quaint than scandalous. Her self-assessment does have intertextual significance, however, in regard to her own non-heterosexual film roles (*Foxfire* from 1996 and, more famously, the 1998 HBO film *Gia*)[7] and, more pertinently for our purposes, to how her husband's sexuality might be perceived. In a 2001 article that appeared on Entertainment Tonight

Online just months before the release of *Man*, Jolie's description of her marriage intimates a certain sexual flexibility for both her and her husband:

> The reality is, I love people. If Billy was a woman, then I'd be a lesbian. If I was a man, we'd be a gay couple ("The World According to Jolie").

Thornton suggests his own sexual ambiguity in an advertisement screened theatrically in art-house cinemas in 2002 to promote the Independent Film Channel (IFC). Here he professes his love for walking poodles, then tells the camera/audience:

> People will probably say I'm gay…which I'm not. But what if I was, what if I was?!

This mock defensiveness is complemented by his cryptic commentary on the *Man*'s DVD, in which he bemusedly tells the heard-but-not-seen Coen brothers about his on-screen tête-a-tête with Tolliver, "This is one of my first gay scenes." The brothers break out laughing.

A large number of gay people working in Hollywood remain hesitant to come out as anything but heterosexual (Ehrenstein), an unremarkable fact when compared to most businesses in the United States (Mann). The statistic becomes noteworthy in light of Hollywood's persistent role in promulgating sex and romance—almost always between a man and a woman— both to a national and an international audience, and paradoxical given the film industry's traditionally high percentage of gay personnel (Mann; Brownfield). Coinciding with a new wave of queer activism by the 1990s, there were protests against "negative" lesbian portrayals in *Basic Instinct* (1992) and the outing of Jodie Foster in the course of some gay activists' protests against the arguably gay-coded serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Such incidents were high-profile expressions of a general hunger among gays and lesbians for more inclusive and less stigmatized representations of eroticism between individuals of the same sex.[8]

Since the uproar over these films, a mounting number of rumors about, outings of, and a few actual comings-out by those working in Hollywood have accompanied an unprecedented increase of regular main characters on television (notably on *Will and Grace, Queer as Folk,* and *Six Feet Under*) and a striking increase in gay supporting roles in fiction film (see Gross; Walters).[9] This seemingly post-*Ellen* development, a product of ongoing and widespread mobilization of gay activists on a variety of issues, surfaces in the mass media as the new “visibility.” And into this category even a film as “discreet” in this regard as *The Man Who Wasn’t There* has been placed.

A prominent gay-identified publication, *The Advocate*, exemplifies the spirit of gay “visibility” in its headline:

> Big Gay Twists: They’re b-a-a-ack—those wacky, wonderful supporting characters who turn out to be gay in the last reel. Thanks, Hollywood! We feel included!

The article’s author, Dave White, alludes breathlessly to

> the year of the Big Gay Lug, the manly, lumbering brute or squat, rotund male who—surprise!—got caught checking out the dudes instead of the chicks.

White’s “brief, mostly butch list” includes such films as *Saving Silverman* and *The Mexican*. The latter featured James Gandolfini (Big Dave in *The Man Who Wasn’t There*) as “a hit man who gets clocked cruising another guy.” White also gives a nod to the sexually oriented diversity found in *Man*:

> Character actor and Coen brothers staple Jon Polito [Creighton Tolliver] tries to seduce Billy Bob Thornton [Ed Crane] by grabbing his crotch with one hand and his own toupee with the other. Thornton [Crane] is not amused.

Apparently, the advent of explicitly gay supporting characters is just recent enough that any deeper analysis of Thornton’s character, not to mention Tolliver’s, seems beside the point, at least to White. Two other reviewers that do bother to evaluate the film’s gay characterizations also inadvertently point to another difficulty with gay “visibility”: It tends to rely on “positive” or “negative” assessments, which several scholars (e.g., Stam and Spence; Gray; Jhally and Lewis) have shown to be fraught with ideological peril. One of the main problems with such value-laden judgments, namely, their *relative* nature, is foregrounded in the two following reviews: Filethirteen.com's openly gay film critic, Lodger, credits *The Man Who Wasn't There* for not depicting "gay minor characters" in "a sort of negative homophobic stereotype" but instead offering "a simple sideline moment that gives the film color and interest." In contrast, SPLICEDWIRE's Rob Blackwelder complains,

> Is it really necessary [for Tolliver] to come on to Ed for us to understand the character is gay?

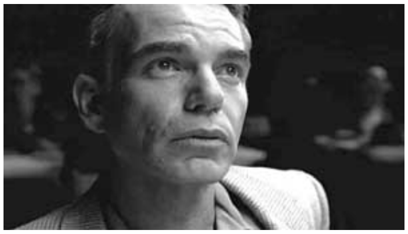
Even MovieMom.com, a culturally conservative web site that provides advice to parents seeking suitable entertainment for their children, falls into the gay "visibility" trap. While offering traditional cautions about representations of sex and violence in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the site also lauds the film in its "Tolerance/Diversity Issues" category for portraying a "non-stereotyped gay character." Whether a sleazy salesman vain enough to fuss over his balding head *and* wear a fancy toupee should be considered non-stereotypical is, as Lodger's and Blackwelder's reviews remind us, debatable. But the erotophobic criteria employed by the Movie Mom (the "pen" name of Nell Minow) keeps her from considering the sexuality of the film's other characters. She limits herself to the immediate concerns of what she constructs as a typical, if non-stereotypical, anxious parent, whose notion of political correctness can disarticulate homosexual identity, at least of the gay *male* variety, from the thought of sex itself.

In this light, a curious double standard emerges when we contrast the Movie Mom's review of *The Man Who Wasn't There* with the one she provides for *Mulholland Drive*. In the David Lynch film, the "explicit lesbian encounter" is relegated to the category of "Nudity/Sexual References," while all that is included about *Mulholland Drive* in "Tolerance/Diversity Issues" is that "All lead characters are white," a fact the reviewer had overlooked in the Coen brothers' film. All in all, the Movie Mom finds the sexual references in *The Man Who Wasn't There* so "safe" that her review actually compares the film favorably with those from the "halcyon days" of the Production Code. The Movie Mom conveniently disavows the Code's "sex perversion" clause which forbade all references to homosexuality so that she can praise *Man* for its relative conformity ("with the exception of one jolting moment in a car") to the Code's encouragement of "morality tales for uncertain times" in which "evil could not triumph."

Continued: No tough guy, no femme fatale

No tough guy, no femme fatale

Who’s seducing whom? Doris dresses in the bedroom...



...as Crane cranes, apparently at her...

...but actually at a scantily clad Jesus Christ in church.

As Klawans and a preponderance of film critics and historians point out, “reticence about its subject matter” is clearly in the classical noir tradition. However, reticence about Crane’s self-closeted gayness is not concomitant with either the aesthetics or thematics of neo-noir. To the contrary, another of the prime differences between these generically related forms is neo-noir’s reveling in *explicitness* toward sexuality, violence, and off-color language made possible by the dissolution of the Production Code and its subsequent replacement by the Ratings system. Several post-classical noirs were remade or reworked at least partly for this reason.[10] Michele Aaron makes the classical/neo-noir distinction in relation to homosexuality specifically:

> The linking of homosexual potential with danger...has existed throughout the history of the Hollywood film [noir], either as the absent yet deadly potential of an often subtextual homosexuality [in the classical period] or as the overt exploitation of its deadliness in numerous [more recent] films from *Cruising* [1980]...to *Silence of the Lambs* [1991]...to *Basic Instinct* [1992] (72).

Why, then, in the *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, have we returned— counterintuitively, it would seem—to subtextuality with a vengeance, not only in regard to homosexuality but to sexuality as a whole? One possible generic explanation for the constriction here in gay representability is that *Man* is more an homage to classical noir than a full blown neo-noir. The film is set in the 1940s, after all, not in the contemporary period favored by the bulk of neo-noirs. Also it is shot in black-and-white, something not even the few neo-noirs that remained true to the classical time period allowed themselves.[11] It paradigmatically relates its twisted tale through flashback and dutifully creates through character,

Birds of a feather—Crane and his platonic love, Birdy, on the road to fellatio.

situation and ambience “an exotic milieu of crime and corruption” (Krutnik 42). Indeed, *Man* seems to emulate the dominant classical noir form, the “tough thriller,” in every way except two: the “tough guy” protagonist himself, and his adjunct, the femme fatale.

Ed Crane’s cynical, unsmiling demeanor and “epigrammatic, controlled” voice over may elicit comparisons with those of the hard-boiled protagonists of Hammett, Chandler, Cain, and McCoy. But these attributes hardly function, as “a sign of the hero’s potency,” as Krutnik sees them doing for the “tough thriller” (42). To the contrary, Crane seems “unmanly” in his (in)actions in relation to Big Dave (his disinclination to “sock him in the nose”), to Doris (his seeming sexual disinterest in her), and to Birdy (his exclaiming “Heaven’s to Betsy!” as she goes down on him). And these plot situations stand in marked contrast to Crane’s “virility” in his voice over, which itself is “feminized” by its coded connection to the written rather than spoken word.

“Looking at something changes it.” Flamboyant lawyer Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) explains the Uncertainty Principle in Doris’ prison cell. The noir visual style here “vies for attention with its convoluted crime story, if not trumping it altogether.”

Of course, the “tough” hero’s putative potency, as Richard Dyer and Jonathan Buchsbaum have shown, is only a cover in any case. According to Dyer, it covers an internal conflict “over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality” (115) and to Buchsbaum, a “core generative anxiety about passive homosexuality” (41). The classical noir hero’s testing or rehearsal of “aggressive masculinity” is a means of denying these conflicts and anxieties. Thus he often relies on “masculinized language,” on the one hand, and need for the femme fatale on the other (Buchsbaum 41). Ed Crane may indulge in the former, even though reluctantly—he’s only writing his story at the behest of the men’s magazine. But the film consistently ignores if not pointedly resists the femme fatale.

Confronted by queerness at every turn: The effeminate teacher Carcanogues (Adam Alexi-Malle) and ...

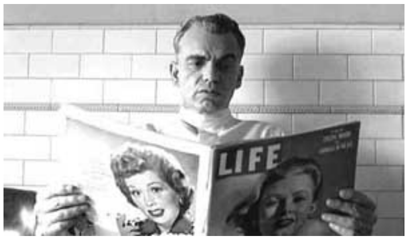
Both of the “women in his life,” Crane’s wife Doris and the teenager Birdy, qualify as would-be femme fatales. From the introductory shot’s voyeuristic gaze into the bedroom, in which Crane’s wife slips on her stockings and pads her bra, to the leg-shaving and dress-zipping scenes, Doris is displayed, for the viewer’s benefit at least, as a brazen, if somewhat vulgar, seductress.[12] The outwardly more refined Birdy’s Lolita-like qualities emerge more gradually but build to an even cruder climax. She makes an abrupt but abortive attempt at fellatio on the open road. Also, true to the black widow's mythical modus operandi, both women do serve in some fashion to "lure the man to his doom." Doris is indirectly responsible for embroiling Crane in the blackmail and killing of Big Dave. Crane's desire to boost Birdy's musical career and her misguided attempt to bring him oral-genital pleasure lead to a near-fatal car accident.

... the androgynous psychic (Lilyan Chauvin).

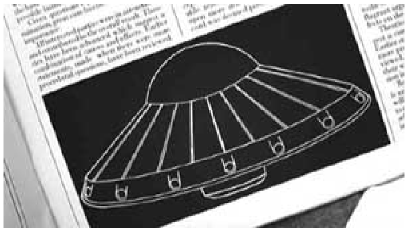
But there the women's resemblance to the archetypal Evil Temptress ends. As we have shown, Crane is not aroused by Doris, and his enthusiasm for Birdy is purely inspirational. The romantic triangle he forms with Doris and Big Dave functions as an inversion of the Cainsian Clytemnestra model. Instead of the wife and male lover's teaming to kill the husband, often through a mock accident, here the husband inadvertently "avenges" his wife's adulteries. As for his obsession with Birdy, in contrast to film noir, it does not lead to Crane's moral depravity but instead to his near redemption. As for sexual attraction, Crane's desire for Birdy operates by another logic entirely: He feels a need to change his unsatisfying life. In this regard, his interest in helping Birdy realize her dreams, or what he imagines her dreams to be, suggests not desire but identification. He needs to see both their respective ambitions fly, fulfilling the promise implied in both their birdlike names.

Tough guy or phony? Even Big Dave's heterosexuality is called into question. Here as he breaks down in his office, he places a hand on Crane's knee.

In the end, Crane seems at least partially like the British detective hero to which the hard-boiled American version was concocted as an alternative. That kind of hero is a man, in Gilbert Seldes words, of "effeminate manners, artistic leanings, and elaborate deductions" who compares to a "real man" like "a shop-window full of dummies" (quoted in Krutnik 42-43). The flamboyant lawyer, Riedenschneider, seems a perfect role model for Crane in this regard, with his epicurean tastes, foppish manners, and connection to the arts (the Da Vinci's Restaurant he frequents, the Turandot Room he books[13]). Crane begins emulating the ace lawyer's "elaborate deductions" and even starts speaking Riedenschneiderese when he says to Birdy that the French piano teacher Carcanogues is "the best...I made some inquiries."



A *Life* magazine report on...


...Roswell, New Mexico...

One could counter that not all classical noirs have “tough” protagonists. *Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* (both 1945), for instance, are rare but prominent examples of noirs with decidedly non-“tough guy” leads (both played by Edward G. Robinson, cast against type). In *Woman in the Window*, Robinson plays a sedentary, middle-aged professor; in *Scarlet Street*, quite similar to Crane, a hen-pecked bank clerk and Sunday painter. Tellingly, however, neither of these non-“tough” noirs feature first-person, voice-over narration. More significantly, both have sinister femme fatales to whom the male protagonists are strongly attracted sexually. An irresistible yet forbidden sexual urge drives both films’ main characters—indeed most noirs’— and establishes the films’ narrative and thematics.

... suggestions of flying saucers at Nirdlinger’s...

... and in the prison corridor...

Yet just the opposite is the case with *Man*: Crane’s *lack* of libido is paradoxically what moves the story forward (at a snail’s pace) and it is what the film is ultimately about. *The Desire That Wasn’t There* becomes an apt post-facto working title for this anti-“tough” thriller in which canonical noirs’ prime character motivations—financial greed and sexual lust (Martin 105)—have been replaced by a devastating repression.

Historicizing a period noir

... and Crane’s UFO vision in the prison courtyard.

While the period setting of *The Man Who Wasn’t There* is anomalous for neo-noirs in general, it is less the exception than the rule for the Coen brothers’ films. Only three of their nine films overall and two of their six noirs (*Blood Simple* and *Fargo*) have been set contemporaneously. What sets *Man* apart from the filmmakers’ other period work is its comparative historical groundedness. In contrast, *Barton Fink* (released in 1991, set in 1941), *The Big Lebowski*(1998/1991), or the non-noir *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994/1958-59) all seem “out of sync with the times in which they were placed” (Bergan 135). The historical coordinates of *Man*’s diegetic setting give its (homo)sexual subtext a resonance that goes beyond fidelity to its genre.

Whether overseas or on the home front, large numbers of men and women in the 1940s found the war’s homosocial environments quite hospitable for expressing same-sex eroticism, a collective self-assertion that carried over into peacetime for many gays and lesbians. Writes historian John D’Emilio,

> In particular, they swelled the gay population of port cities or centers of the war industry, such as Los Angeles, New York, and the San Francisco Bay area, to which the war years had exposed them (31).

In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the effeminate music teacher Carcanogues resides in San Francisco, which is also where Tolliver's hairpiece came from. Crane, meanwhile, who has lived in the small town of Santa Rosa without ever going overseas, nevertheless readily recognizes the interloper Tolliver's gayness.

The 1948 Kinsey report had mixed effects on homosexuals. It legitimated the idea that homosexually inclined men were indistinguishable from their heterosexual counterparts and that homosexual acts were not uncommon among the general populace. While reassuring psychologically to many gays and lesbians, Kinsey's findings, according to D'Emilio,

> served not to ameliorate hostility toward gay men and women, but to magnify suddenly the proportions of the dangers they allegedly posed (37).

Indeed, after Congressional testimony in 1950 acknowledged that many State Department employees had been dismissed on grounds related to homosexuality, Republicans began attacking the Truman Administration with the charge that undetected "sexual perverts" as much as Communists threatened national security (D'Emilio 41).[14]

Gender roles, on the whole, were being renegotiated during this period in the United States in the workplace and the home alike, as war veterans returned to civilian employment to find more women in the workforce. *Man* illustrates this situation not only in Doris Crane's job as chief accountant at Nirdlinger's department store but in the dissatisfaction expressed by Ed and Big Dave over their "less than manly" occupations (described further below). Additionally, in response to both a burgeoning consumerist ethos and an expanding corporate business structure, shifting notions of masculinity increasingly stressed domesticity and cooperation in contradistinction to entrepreneurship, initiative and independence (Corber 5-6). Crane's voice-over chronicling of creature comforts ironically articulates the postwar discourse of prosperity that increasingly defined men as consumers within the private sphere (6):

> We had an electric ice box, gas hearth, garbage grinder built into the sink…you might say we had it made.

Along with the western and the war film, classical film noir broke with the emergent socio-cultural discourse of masculine passivity but also, singularly and paradoxically, with the Cold War etiquette of gay invisibility. The hard-boiled hero, in his macho posturing and contempt for material comforts associated with the domestic sphere, expressed a desire to reclaim a form of male identity now displaced by commodity culture (Corber 9, 28). His taciturn toughness and seeming self-sufficiency acted to allay male panic by providing identification with a hyper-masculine subjectivity. That subjectivity, nostalgically drawn from the pre-corporate capitalist period, was also discursively akin to post-World War II heroes John Wayne and G.I. Joe.

In its "visual economy," however, film noir also posed a threat to emergent Cold War discourse. In its emphasis on style at the expense of narrative coherence, film noir can be seen as "subversive, for in reversing the hierarchical relation between spectacle and narrative that normally prevailed in classical Hollywood cinema," it encouraged at least a partial "homosexualizing" (in Robert Corber's terms) or "de-masculinizing" (in Laura Mulvey's) of the spectator's gaze.

The hyper-stylization once associated more exclusively with male gay camp has become in the intervening decades a hallmark of the postmodern condition in general and the Coens' oeuvre more specifically. Such a "homosexualization of society," while creating an interesting conjuncture between camp and postmodernism, would also seem to remove from the latter some of the former's subversive sting. Already in the "modern" era, however, noir's oppositional mode of spectatorship at the level of form lent itself to co-option on the level of content, now with gay, or at least gay-*coded*, characters. Functioning, as with the femme fatale, to contrast with and therefore to highlight the hard-boiled hero's masculinity, gay-coded male characters appeared more frequently in film noir than in most other classical Hollywood films and developed a distinctive iconography in opposition to that of the "tough" protagonist: upper-crust (or foreign) accent, prissy mannerisms, impeccable taste, and a soft or corpulent body (Corber 10; Buchsbaum 38).

The tropes of gay representability as seen in classical noir interface with those in *The Man Who Wasn't There* in ambiguous and contradictory ways. First, in *Man*, not only is gayness made visible in the explicitly gay Creighton Tolliver, but when combined with other "coded" and "possible" homosexuals, queerness in some form confronts Crane at every turn. Tolliver passes the queer baton to the epicurean Riedenschneider, who hands it off to the fleshy, French-accented Carcanogues. Then there's Crane's brother-in-law, Frank, the "principal barber," who besides being another "soft body," lives alone.

Even Big Dave's heterosexuality, despite his affair with Doris, is called into question through his corpulence, his blubbering in front of Crane, his delicate snipping of cigar ends (with the "dame's weapon"), his handing of his lighted "Romeo and Juliet" brand cigar to Crane during his crying bout,[16] and his turning out to be another "phony." Crane levels this same epithet at Carcanogues and at the androgynous medium he visits after Doris's suicide, a suicide prompted by her discovery that Big Dave, for all his macho talk, wasn't the man she thought he was. Far from being a war hero, it turns out, Big Dave actually served in the Navy as a lowly clerk and spent most of his enlisted time in the brig, for fighting.

Crane's gay connection to Big Dave is enhanced through two major parallels: one having to do with business, the other with flying saucers. As for the first, both men have *married into* businesses owned by their wives' families, and both rebel against their financial dependence on women by resorting to "passive" crime and pursuing "unmanly" careers as venture capitalists. Crane takes up blackmail and acts as the "silent partner" of the acknowledged homosexual Tolliver; Big Dave takes up embezzling and attempts to establish a department store annex featuring women's clothing with Doris as comptroller.

The extraterrestrial motif is introduced explicitly by Big Dave's wife, who confides in Crane, after Big Dave's death, that her husband showed no sexual interest in her after their alien encounter on a camping trip. The extent to which UFOs were generally penetrating the late-1940s U.S. imaginary is evinced in a later scene in the barber shop. There, a *Life* magazine article Crane is reading on dry cleaning ("Dry Cleaning: The Wave of the Future") is followed by one on flying saucers ("Mysteries of Roswell, New Mexico")—two displacements of illicit sexuality in one mass-cultural volume. Skeptical of the alien angle at first, Crane, bolstered by the increasing sense of his own alienation, ultimately becomes a "believer," but in the hopeful sense, not in the paranoid sense of Big Dave's wife.

Henceforth flying saucers, previously evident only in the set design's suggestive light fixtures and the aforementioned *Life* article, begin to crop up "for real." They become a possible figment of Crane's fevered imagination: first, as visual prologue and coda to his apparent coma/near-death experience following the car accident; later and most notably, in his prison-yard vision shortly before his execution, when an alien craft hovers overhead, for his benefit alone.

Perhaps the strongest link between Crane and Big Dave is the killing of Creighton Tolliver. Big Dave is the one who kills "the pansy." Yet Crane is the one who is ultimately tried and convicted of the crime. Ironically, this is the lone crime in the film that he *didn't* commit. Or didn't he? His execution is excessive even by the punitive logic of the Production Code since his only "wrongdoings" were blackmail and a failure to notify the police of his self-defense killing of Big Dave.

But Crane's execution is also a form of poetic justice. If Crane's hyper-alienation and deep depression are indeed manifestations of his latent homosexuality, then his conviction for murdering the gay salesman is an irrefutable sign that the reluctant barber is guilty, symptomatically rather than implicitly, of violently suppressing his own gay impulses. And Crane's earlier, seemingly deranged rant against barbering becomes an illuminating self-indictment:

> This hair, it’s a part of us, and we throw it away.

Continued: Divining the Source

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Divining the “source”

In discussing the relation of their earlier film *Blood Simple* (1984) to classical film noir, Joel Coen observed that he and brother Ethan were trying

> to emulate the *source* those movies came from [meaning noir’s literary canon] rather than the movies themselves (quoted in Martin 33).

The primary literary source for *The Man Who Wasn’t There,* as for the Coen brothers’ other pre-*Man* noirs— *Blood Simple*, *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Barton Fink*, *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski*—may have been the usual suspects: Cain, Hammett, and Chandler, with a touch of Elmore Leonard (Bergan 48). As for the queer connection, beyond the homoeroticism clinging by definition to the “man’s world” of film noir, overtly gay characters or references have appeared in most of the Coen brothers’ neo-noirs. Bernie Bernbaum, Mink, and Eddie Dane are clearly identified as gay in *Miller’s Crossing*. Jesus Quintana is arguably so in *The Big Lebowski*. And the eponymous Barton Fink is suspected of being “a little fruity.”

The three queer faces of John Turturro—As the clearly homosexual Bernie Bernbaum in *Miller’s Crossing* (1990)...

...as the arguably gay Jesus Quintana in *The Big Lebowski* (1998)...

...and as the somewhat “fruity” Barton Fink in *Barton*

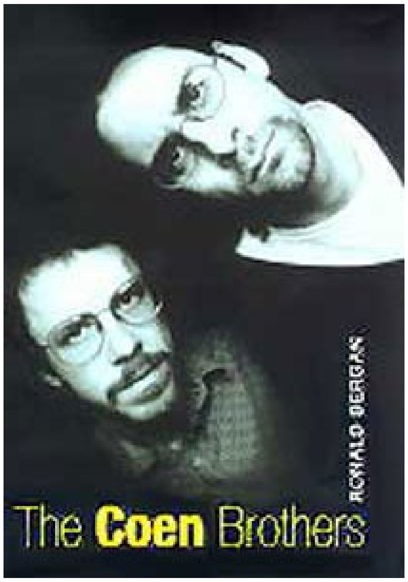
The films incorporate queer characterizations and references, as with those of the “pansy” Creighton Tolliver, that are generally invidious. Such political incorrectness is excused if not redeemed by the fact that the Coen brothers are equal opportunity offenders. Their defamations of character extend to class, gender, and ethno-racial and religious groups—including the brothers’ own, Jews. In their films, defamatory language functions to demean the subject rather than the object of the opprobrium, to expose rather than to exploit racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.

The persistence of gay representation in the Coens’ work is partly attributable to genre, as already discussed. Another, neo-auteurist explanation

Fink (1991).

derives from the brothers' intense fraternal relationship. Ronald Bergan's biography of the filmmakers begins, as if in homage to the brothers' impishly macabre sensibility, with Joel's slaying of Ethan, and then himself, as described by the brothers' pseudonymous film editor and alter ego, Roderick Jaynes:

> The motive for the killing is still unclear. Some say that Joel could not tolerate the duality of their existence.



More than "brothers under the skin"? *Man*'s producers, writers, and directors, Joel and Ethan Cohen, from the cover of Ronald Bergan's biography.

Jaynes writes this, then appends a quote from Edgar Allan Poe's doppelganger tale of murder and suicide, *William Wilson*, which allegedly was scrawled on a note found on Joel's desk:

> You have conquered and I yield. Yet, henceforth art thou also dead— dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist— and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself (2).

Bergan justifies this curious—and, of course, fictitious—opening to his biographical subjects by stating,

> I hoped to suggest that they were abnormally close (3).

Later, Bergan quotes George Clooney, co-star of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Coen brothers' film before *The Man Who Wasn't There*, who indicates how this "abnormal closeness" might relate to queerness:

> They are not brothers at all, and Ethan is really a woman. Don't let the whiskers fool you (5).[17]

Bound, but commercially driven: Gina Gerhson poses with Jennifer Tilly.

Bergan fails to pursue this queer strand, leaving it on the level of mischievous (fore)play. Neither do we intend, at this time, to put the Coen brothers, their work in general, or *The Man Who Wasn't There* in particular "on the couch." However, in light of Freud's suggestion that jokes, and other strategies of "humorous displacement," are the "highest of the defensive processes" and a preeminent path to the unconscious (233), a psychoanalytic approach appears to provide a fruitful basis for further investigation. For now, suffice to say that an uncanny connection between Crane's "killing" of a part of himself and Joel and Ethan Coen's being more than "brothers under the skin" can be drawn from the following lines from the brothers' pet noir *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which Bergan has chosen to close the first chapter of his biography:

"Swish" pan: Julianne Moore's Cathy Whitaker opens the door...

> There's a guy in No. 7 that murdered his brother, and says he didn't really do it, his subconscious did it. I asked him what that meant, and he says you got two selves, one that you know about and the other that you don't know about, because it's subconscious. It shook me up. Did I really do it and not know it? (3-4)

Conclusion

...on her husband Frank (Dennis Quaid) in *Far From Heaven* (2002). The "outing" is actually rendered in a swish pan in the film.

The Movie Mom, of all sources, may be on to something. The alternately mild and oblique homosexual aspects of *The Man Who Wasn't There* on the whole appear quite retrograde, certainly in comparison to the more forthright revisionism of recent cable-TV offerings and another contemporary neo-noir, *Bound* (1996). Again, appearances can deceive. First, the perils of "positive" and "negative" evaluation are strikingly evident in regard to *Bound*. While Hirsch finds the Wachowski brothers' tale of successful lesbian revenge killers "revolting" (209), Aaron applauds the film for "its sane and sexy stars and happy ending" (82).[18] Second, in its focus on lesbian as opposed to gay male sexuality, *Bound* only reinforces the double standard in gay "visibility" already noted with regard to *Mulholland Drive*.

Big Dave's lighting Crane's cigar echoes a similar homoerotic gesture...

Admittedly, by depicting eroticism between women rather than between men, films such as *Bound* and *Mulholland Drive* can appeal to lesbians and bisexual women and to others who feel similar political allegiance. Yet at the same time, by providing attractive women as sanctioned points of interest, such films promise crossover appeal by accommodating the homophobia of some heterosexually identified men, who might feel threatened by the depiction of sexual passion among members of their own gender.[19]

...that of Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) toward Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) in *Double Indemnity* (1944).

Gay men in the few Hollywood films that depict them tend to remain, if not incidental, relatively chaste and often exterior to the subjectivity of the main protagonist. Even the fairly explicit male homosexuality represented in Todd Haynes' homage to Douglas Sirk**,** *Far from Heaven* (2002)**,** is symptomatic here. That film emphasizes the revelation of a man's same-sex desires from the standpoint of his heterosexually oriented wife. Furthermore, such apparent Hollywood breakthroughs as Haynes' neo-melodrama and the prestigious meta-literary adaptation *The Hours* (2002)—the latter dealing more with lesbians in relationships than with women in the heat of passion[20] —have relied on generic patterns different from those of neo-noir in pursuit of their commercial objectives. Neo-noir, in contrast to these other genres, has kept sexual temptation a central and foregrounded narrative catalyst, particularly as it pertains to the hypersexualized legacy of the femme fatale. Yet even here the same-sex double standard is in operation. As Hirsch states,

> As in straight pornography, where gay men are rigorously excluded and lesbianism is a fetishized, acceptable aphrodisiac, so in mainstream neo-noir lesbianism, either explicitly named as in *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Bound* (1996), or not-so-subtextual, as in *Black Widow* (1987), is more admissible than [male] homosexuality (207).[21]

(Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale*, from 2002, further supports Hirsch's point, given this neo-noir's extended lesbian-tease opening.) As a result**,** the disparity in gay male and lesbian representation has tended to be exacerbated.

Selectively returning to the strictures of the Production Code, as the Movie Mom reminds us**,** *The Man Who Wasn't There* is a neo-noir that, in its homage to classical noir, aesthetically limits representation of Crane's homosexuality. By attempting to reconcile noir conventions with the sexual interests of its male protagonist, *The Man Who Wasn't There* speaks only its generic name.

And by complying with or relying on generic traditions, commercial pressures, art-house aesthetics, and queer readings to alternately disclose and disavow its deeper meanings, the film is guilty of suppressing its more subversive instincts. Even retrospective attributions of repressed homosexuality to Crane, if left with him, ultimately displace onto the protagonist much of the repression that characterizes the whole film.

The question only partly is one of art versus commerce, classical noir versus neo-noir, explicit meaning versus implicit meaning. For those concerned with the constitutive link between gay representability and gay life in the United States today, subtextual resonance notwithstanding, *The Man Who Wasn’t There* signifies a liberatory road looked down but not taken.

Continued: Notes

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

Thanks to *Jump Cut* editors Julia Lesage, Chuck Kleinhans, and John Hess for their generous and thoughtful contributions to this essay, and to Matt Gatlin for his assistance in image retrieval.

1. “*None Know My Name* was another of their favorites,” writes Jaynes about another title considered by his ostensible employers, “rejected only because it had too many *n*’s and *m*’s” (viii). Jaynes is also credited as the author of the introduction to the screenplays of the Coens’ films *Barton Fink* and *Miller’s Crossing*.

2. The authors of this essay are quite aware of the unresolved issue of film noir’s generic status, and of the fact that it has variously been referred to as “a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a ‘phenomenon’” (Naremore 106). Since this question is outside the purview of our analysis, however, we will refer to noir as a genre for the sake of convenience.

3. The authors made attempts to interview the Coen brothers but were unable to secure their participation.

4. Two other magazines we get a good look at on Crane’s prison desk are *Stalwart* and *Wonder*, featuring article headings proclaiming “After 10 Years of Married Life…I Discovered I Was an Escaped Lunatic!” and “I Was Abducted by Aliens,” respectively.

5. Naremore takes the noir-consciousness notion to its most extreme, arguing quite persuasively that film noir should be looked at less as a generic category than as part of “the history of ideas.” Essentially “a creation of postmodern culture,” noir, in Naremore’s revisioning, becomes little more than “the projection of an idea onto the past” (106, 107).

6. *The Man Who Wasn’t There* was actually shot in color, as commercial insurance, before being transferred to black and white for the film’s final cut. This decision was soon vindicated at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, where Joel Coen shared the director’s prize with another celebrated film maverick, David Lynch, who won for *Mulholland Drive*.

7. The lesbian-identified web site Dyxploitation lists both *Foxfire* and *Gia* in its section titled “Movies with Dyke Appeal,” where readers can contribute film suggestions of possible relevance to a queer woman.

The list is annotated, with Jolie's presence noted not only on account of her explicitly queer characters in those two films but also for the perhaps more ambiguously queer role she plays in *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). Writes one contributor,

> Her cool, dykish character had me captured in the movie and there's even a scene where Winona Ryder's character reaches over to Jolie's character to give her a kiss. In my opinion, this was one of those films with 'hidden' gay content. I loved it.

http://www.dyxploitation.com/depts/movies.html

8. Protests against the 1980 film *Cruising* had been part of an earlier wave of gay activism. As for *Basic Instinct*, protests included revelations in advance of the film's release that Sharon Stone's bisexual character would turn out to be the elusive serial killer (not necessarily borne out by the film itself, of course, given its famously ambiguous ending). Gay protests were also mounted in 1991 against Oliver Stone's *JFK*, for its implicit assumption of a gay Mafioso's involvement in the killing of President Kennedy.

9. Recent developments have somewhat reversed, or at least complicated, the TV/movies relation in regard to gay representability. The *Los Angeles Times* reported at the start of the 2002 TV season that, contrary to an earlier trend,

> this year's prime time line-up will actually witness a sharp decline in the number of recurring gay, lesbian and transgender characters (Lowry F1).

In May 2003, the same newspaper backtracked, however (spurred by *All My Children*'s first-ever same-sex kiss in network daytime television), claiming that at least "smooches between women are no longer taboo" (Rosen E28). As for the movies, 2002 saw an increase in major same-sex characters, several in high-profile offerings such as *Far From Heaven* and *The Hours* (discussed later in the essay), in addition to *Frida* and *Femme Fatale*, as well as in the lower-budget independent *Kissing Jessica Stein* and *Rules of Attraction*. In the first half of 2003, lesbian kissing scenes have been featured in *Anger Management* and *The Real Cancun*.

10. Prominent noir remakes include: *Body Heat* (1981, based on *Double Indemnity*); *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981, 1946); *Against All Odds* (1984, based on *Out of the Past*, 1948); *No Way Out* (1987, based on *The Big Clock*, 1948); *D.O.A* (1988, 1950); *Cape Fear* (1991, 1962); *Guncrazy* (1992, based on *Gun Crazy*, 1949); *The Underneath* (1994, based on *Criss Cross*, 1949); *Kiss of Death* (1995, 1947). For a more complete list of noir remakes, see Martin 30-33, and Smallman, Smallman and Bohrer (1994).

11. Prominent period neo-noirs, other than those mentioned by the

Coen brothers, include: *Farewell, My Lovely* (1973); *Chinatown* (1974); *Thieves Like Us* (1974); *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981); *L.A. Confidential* (1997). Partial and/or idiosyncratic uses of black and white in neo-noir include: *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1981); *D.O.A.* (1988); *Dead Again* (1991); and *Memento* (2001). For a more complete list of period neo-noirs, again see Martin, and Smallman, Smallman and Bohrer.

12 The (hetero)sexual thrust of the bedroom scene is literally undercut when the scene's apparent last shot, a close-up of Crane seemingly gazing up at Doris, is actually the next scene's first shot, which is followed by a low-angle tilt up to the true "object of his gaze," a scantily clad Jesus on the cross—part of the church setting for the Cranes' weekly bingo game.

13. Additional gay significance can be attached to Da Vinci and Turandot, and thus, by association, to Riedenschneider: Leonardo Da Vinci, after whom the restaurant was presumably named, was famously "diagnosed" by Freud (posthumously, of course) as a homosexual; Turandot refers, as Riedenschneider tells Crane, to the Puccini opera, a cultural form stereotypically popular among gays.

14. Gays were far from the only minority group linked to Communists. Jews, from the earliest Socialist stirrings, had been openly chastised for their "disproportionate" involvement with radical leftwing causes. Jews and gays, meanwhile, have their own discursive historical bond, with Jewish males persistently having been characterized, in Europe and the United States, as effeminate. Joel and Ethan Coen, it bears noting, are Jewish. For in-depth discussions of the origins and ramifications of the Jewish-gay connection, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: Jewish Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

15. Prominent examples of such characters include Peter Lorre's Joe Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Laird Cregar's Ed Cornell in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1942), Douglas Walton's Lindsay Marriot in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), Charles Laughton's Earl Janoth in *The Big Clock* (1948), and Clifton Webb's Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (1944).

16. The bit with the cigars seems a nod to the homoerotic cigar- and cigarette-lighting scenes between Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) in *Double Indemnity*.

17. *In The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film*, William Preston Robertson muses along similar lines about the Coens (22):

> One might easily expect them to sleep in bed together, wearing nightshirts and nightcaps and contrapuntally snoring, a la Laurel and Hardy.

But they do not."

18. *Bound* was also warmly recommended by two contributors to Dyxploitation's aforementioned internet list, "Movies with Dyke Appeal." In addition, published "sexpert" Susie Bright, an openly bisexual woman, served as an advisor on the film's sex scenes. Her own account of her involvement can be read on her website.

19. Similarly, journalist Lisa Rosen, noting the increase in lesbian kissing scenes on U.S. television in 2003, asks: "But are they a sign of society's acceptance or a rating's ploy based on straight-male fantasies?" (E28).

20. In *The Hours*, the character Laura Brown (Julianne Moore) gives a passionate and desperate kiss to another woman. But her story, set in the 1950s, focuses more on what she is giving up in order to come out as a lesbian, particularly her relationship with her son (who, not incidentally, figures prominently in the contemporary portion of the film, as an esteemed gay poet who suffers from AIDS).

21. 2002 seemed to mark some redress of the imbalance in gay male and lesbian romantic depictions in Hollywood films. While lesbian sexual interaction was featured in *The Hours*, *Frida, Femme Fatale,* and *Kissing Jessica Stein*, signaling an uptick in queer representation generally (see Note 9), gay male kissing also took center stage, in *Far From Heaven* and *Rules of Attraction*. Even here, however, a caveat is in order: *Far From Heaven*'s gay embrace did not include the film's protagonist, and *Rules of Attractio*n's could be interpreted as occurring in a dream. As for indications of a possible trend toward increased queer subtext in recent Hollywood films, see Stephen Farber's commentary "Are They or Aren't They?" (*Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2003: E12).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Three Kings: neocolonial Arab representation

by Lila Kitaeff

Three Kings and the neocolonial imagination in film. Here, the common framing of heroic U.S. combat with a flag in the image establishes an "American" point of view.

Three Kings' U.S. soldier heroes provide numerous points of identification for viewers. Low angle shot here emphasizes male muscular strength and purpose. These protagonists early on refuse to follow the orders of their superior officers. Their characterization thus exemplifies the theme of the outlaw hero.

Colonialism may be officially over, but its ghost lives on in U.S. political actions and cultural productions. This country's administration has taken on as its "righteous duty" to intervene in other countries' governments and policies. Such international intervention is, in fact, a less conscious governmental proclamation of an older colonial ideology, "the white man's burden." This ever present colonial ideal is not only a national governmental stance but is echoed in and validated by popular media.

One of the most consistently misunderstood and misrepresented peoples in the eyes of many Americans are members of the Arabic nations, a fact made painfully clear since September 2001. Popular media representations of Arabs have long been limited to simplistic narratives about good and evil characters, both desperately in need of U.S. intervention either in the form of aid or destruction. As Edward Saïd, a leading Palestinian-Western scholar puts it:

> The last permissible racism here [in the United States]—and by permissible, I mean it's okay publicly in the media and elsewhere—is to be racist against Arabs. You can say the most outrageous things in the most respectable magazines and newspapers and even on the air about Arabs, things you would never dare to say about any other ethnic or racial group. (Viswanathan 320)

My use of the term "Arab" in this paper should be understood to refer to Arabic-speaking people

The U.S. soldiers grow morally through a change of heart. Instead of stealing gold, their original goal, they save Iraqi civilians. This plot twist builds into the script a humanist, non-oppositional critique of the Gulf War.

The film provides a happy ending for several dozen Iraqis, who escape thanks to the film's U.S. soldier- heroes. In symbolic terms, the ending, here "native" jubilation upon rescue, parallels the United States' "neo-colonial mission." That is, the film personalizes an intervention in the affairs of a colonized nation by using the logic of the colonizer to attempt to solve the problems of the colonized.

and/or people tracing their heritage to an Arabic nation in the Middle East or North Africa. The League of Arab States currently includes Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Palestinian Territories, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Arabs are not a race, and they do not all share the same religion or political beliefs. However, it should be noted that people from other parts of the Middle East and/or those of the Muslim faith are often falsely identified as Arabs within the United States.

The Arab American Institute notes,

> In both popular culture and government policy, anti-Arab stereotypes since the 1970's have affixed a stigma on Arab ethnicity in America... The Arab as villain has been a favorite scape-goat of American culture (par. 11).

In the 1980s and 90s the stereotype of Arab terrorists as generic "bad guys" rose to prominence in films starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, such as *Commando* and *True Lies*. Many people in the United States have had only this kind of Arabic image readily at hand. The cultural association is so strong that the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 was immediately blamed on Arabic groups based on no other evidence than the stereotype of Arab as terrorist. Even reputable newspapers and magazines have done little to improve the image of Arabs since the press often focuses on the mysterious nature of Arab peoples and the chaos and evil of Arab governments (Saïd in Viswanathan 295-296).

In the past, this view of the Arabic world as a dark and mysterious place has supported U.S. political and military intervention in the Mideast and Africa, either through direct U.S. military campaigns or its political and economic support of such campaigns; we have seen military action that the U.S. supported in recent times in Iraq, Somalia, and the Palestinian territories. Today we see the continuation of these governmental efforts in many of its actions and, ideologically, in the way it represents "the war on terrorism." Now, with striking contemporary resonances, the Persian Gulf War of 1991 stands as a defining moment when both the U.S. government and many political commentators relied on Arab stereotypes to justify an unjustifiable war to the nation.

Today, since under the leadership of another President Bush, we have again attacked Iraq, this situation should prompt us to take another look at the first Gulf war, from which our current attack descends. At the time of this writing, late March 2003, the United States has been at war with Iraq for one week, after having threatened attack for several months. Unsupported by the majority of the world's nations, including many citizens of the United States who have taken to the streets in massive protests, President Bush used war powers granted to him by the United States Congress. Bombing and ground fighting have taken place throughout the country of Iraq, the oilfields in the South have been "secured," and U.S. and British troops are on their way to begin fighting in Baghdad. So far, the expected uprising against Saddam Hussein in Southern Iraq has not taken place and Iraqi resistance has been greater than the U.S. had claimed it would be, leaving no doubt that the war will be longer and bloodier than previously imagined. However, Bush insists that the United States will "fight for as long as it takes" to remove Hussein from power and liberate the Iraqi people.

The U.S. army tries to prevent George Clooney (lower right) and the other protagonists from rescuing the Iraqi civilians. The soldier-heroes see the flaws in their officers and in the U.S. mission insofar as it failed to save Iraq by destroying the "bad" Arabs, that is, Saddam Hussein's regime.

The Gulf War on film

Three Kings (Dir. David O. Russell, 1999) is a complex film exploring the ramifications of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It is a cultural production that self-consciously attempts to move away from these mainstream views of Arabs I discuss above. However, it still remains marked by colonial ideology. In my analysis, I will locate the film in a tradition of neocolonialism, one that separates the colonizer and the colonized into categories of identification centered around "self" and "other." In film, these categories are created specifically through the cinematic apparatus. That is, Hollywood film "interpellates" its viewers, or encourages their identification with characters, by creating various “spectator positions.” These spectator positions are established not only by the storyline and the action, but also by the visual trajectory of the film, which proceeds in time through the main characters’ points of view and the narrative goal that the script sets up for the protagonists to reach. In this case, the narrative goal is what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam would call their “neocolonial mission.” The “neocolonial mission,” as I will explore further below, is to intervene in the affairs of colonized nations, to use the logic of the colonizer to attempt to solve the problems of the colonized.

In *Three Kings*, viewer positions are set up to create a sense of identification (the viewer’s feeling a sense of “self”— I’m briefly in that person’s shoes) or to see characters or situations as safely “other.” Interestingly, such identification processes set up by the film are complicated by the tenuous scripting of a major black American character, who partially elicits spectatorial identification but in the narrative is simultaneously relegated to the category of other. Most important, the film’s very critique of U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf War ultimately remains limited to expression in neocolonial terms, and any critique is further undermined by the film’s use of mainstream U.S. cultural and cinematic themes.

Neocolonialism persists as an ideology and an economic practice that continues to enact and reinforce many of the tenets of colonialism. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam define neocolonialism as follows:

> Although direct colonial rule has largely come to an end, much of the world remains entangled in neocolonialism ... a conjuncture in which direct political and military control has given way to abstract, semi-indirect, largely economic [and cultural] forms of control. (17)

Shohat and Stam argue that as projects, cinema and imperialism have always been tied together since cinema’s origins. They further demonstrate how a submerged colonial presence exists in many contemporary films (100-131). In particular, like *Three Kings*, many films set in the Mideast, Africa, and Asia, often continue the colonial project into our neocolonial era.

Three Kings takes place just as the Gulf War has ended. The film centers around four U.S. soldiers —played by Spike Jonze, Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube, and George Clooney—who find a map leading to Saddam Hussein's hidden gold. During their search for the gold, the U.S. soldiers stumble upon a bunker holding Iraqi civilian prisoners. The four soldiers then shift the focus of their mission to rescue the prisoners, making their way to the Iranian border with Iraqi soldiers in pursuit. The U.S. army attempts to stop them, allowing the civilians to escape across the border only after Clooney's character gives up the gold to his superiors.

Three Kings is a remake of a WWII film, Kelly's Heroes (dir. Brian G. Hutton, 1970). The original film starred Clint Eastwood as the leader of a group of U.S. soldiers in France who defied their superiors' orders in order to steal a stash of Nazi gold hidden behind enemy lines. While hailed as a successful comic antiwar film, *Kelly's Heroes* lacked the moral twist of Russell's film. Interestingly, even though remakes are currently big business in Hollywood, *Three Kings'* connection to its predecessor was barely mentioned in current marketing or critical reviews.

Non-oppositional critique of the Gulf War

In general, *Three Kings*' marketing and reception dwelt on its supposedly unconventional nature. By unconventional, I mean "oppositional" discourse and imagery in the sense of contrasting to those found in dominant cultural productions. Although I will argue that the film does not, in fact, deviate from a typical Hollywood film in its basic message and structure, *Three Kings* does occupy a somewhat tenuous position in terms of Hollywood-type unconventionality. At first glance, viewers might expect the film to be an action-packed adventure and war movie. The main actors are blockbuster action stars (with the exception of

Spike Jonze, director of *Being John Malkovich* and several “Beastie Boys” videos). And director Russell’s previous films, *Spanking the Monkey* and *Flirting with Disaster*, were offbeat in their brand of dark comedy, if not particularly unconventional in form or plot.

Initially film reviewers considered the story original. They said this film had more to it than met the eye, that its message and structure differed from most Hollywood films. A typical review praised *Three Kings* for its “genre subversion, anarchic attitude and barbed political commentary… making cogent points about… America’s role as the world’s policeman.” This same reviewer even suggested that the film addressed “the amorality and lack of consistent principles in American foreign policy. No Hollywood film in memory has addressed such an issue” (McCarthy par. 4 and 18).

However, although Russell does make a certain social critique of the Gulf War, as I will explore below, it is based in mainstream rather than oppositional discourses. For example, he explained this as his goal:

> Taking people’s perceptions of this war, and turning them on their head… all the assumptions that you had about this war need to be looked at and turned over, including the sense of satisfaction you had as a moral victor, as an American.

However, if one were to make an explanatory critique subverting mainstream perceptions of the Gulf War, one would have to take into account the struggle’s historical context and the economic and ideological interests behind U.S. intervention. Such an argument was made by Noam Chomsky and Michael Albert, for example, when they asserted that “the real reason for U.S. opposition to Iraqi occupation of Kuwait is… to keep Washington, Wall Street, and their allies in charge of setting oil prices” (par. 5). And as Chomsky and Albert further pointed out, the U.S. government also has an ideological interest in perpetuating militarism in order to maintain the status quo of military spending and interventionist foreign policy.

Three Kings does not offer this sort of explanatory critique. Instead, the film presents the protagonists as coming to a realization that the United States has failed to save Iraq and destroy Hussein’s regime. According to the film, the United States is mistaken not because it intervened in the Middle East but rather because it did not follow through in its mission to save the good Arabs and crush the bad Arabs, a mission perpetuating neocolonial ideals. The heroes of *Three Kings*, in terms of the film’s logic, right the wrongs of the United States by saving a small group of Iraqi civilians, thus reproducing “the [neo]colonialist structure of the heroes’ relation to the native… [to] sort out the problems of people who cannot sort things out for themselves” (Dyer 156).

Continued: Neocolonial themes and traditional film themes

Neocolonial themes and traditional cinematic themes

Images showing grieving women and relying on pathos are common ways of creating “others.” Here, a point of view shot from the U.S. soldier-heroes’ perspective as they enter the Iraqi village.

Neocolonial cinema encourages the spectator to identify with representations of the colonizing subject and, by partaking of the trajectory set up by the storyline, to posit the colonial project itself as desirable. For example, in the scene in which the U.S. soldier protagonists are shown first entering the village, the images largely present their point of view, inviting identification by literally allowing the spectator to see through their eyes. In this scene the Iraqi civilians are portrayed as dominated and submissive as they beg the Americans to stay and help them. Other Iraqis who want to fight seem incapable of acting on their own as they cry out, “The Americans are here. It’s okay to come out. We can fight Saddam!” Thus, all Iraqi civilians—those beaten down and those who are still resistant—are presented as entirely dependent on U.S. help.

Iraqi soldiers brutally beat children. Civilians are often depicted as dominated and incapable of acting on their own without U.S. help.

As Shohat and Stam put it, such a scene functions to “mobilize” spectatorial desire to participate in the narrative line about the protagonists’successful “neo-colonial mission.” The mobilization of desire works in tandem with spectator positions. Just as the cinematic apparatus interpellates the viewer to identify with the characters and narrative, the desire for which the protagonists strive also becomes the viewer’s desire .

In its ties with other fictions, including novels, drama, and song lyrics, *Three Kings* integrates traditional U.S. cultural and cinematic themes, especially about the outlaw hero. The film also uses a common Hollywood script format for dealing with cultural crises, that of the “problem picture.” These script strategies further weaken the film’s critique of United States ideals. In terms of screenwriting, Robert Ray discusses narrative strategies common in Hollywood in which morally centered characters enact a drama against a

The cinematography relies on a stylized "realism" to show images of death and war.

background of contemporary social issues. This kind of script development is common in what Ray terms "problem pictures," films that critique large social issues but ultimately have happy endings that belie those problems (147).

In films like these, the outlaw hero is a common character. Such a figure possesses his own moral code and works to "correct" socially unjust laws and authority figures (Ray 15). For example, as Richard Dyer describes the genre, in the *Rambo* movies that attempt to critique the Vietnam War, the protagonist Rambo is

> doing the job... that the United States government should be doing. Thus he repeatedly upholds basic American values against the actuality of America" (Dyer 159-160).

In this way, Hollywood's use of the outlaw hero as a solution to historical events distorts perceptions of those events as part of social history, that is, outside of their filmic portrayals (Ray 59-62).

At the beginning of *Three Kings*, the rebellious, disaffected protagonists have a mission, to find the gold, with a motive only of personal entrepreneurship. The script's trajectory is to have them undergo a shift in moral sensibility. In the end, they abandon their racism against the Arabs as they gain new ethics, which now motivate them to save Iraqis whom they believe desperately need their aid. That the protagonists early on refuse to follow the orders of their superior officers exemplifies this theme of the outlaw hero.

Even as they refuse military participation in order to quest for gold, in their rebellion the protagonists function as the script's moral center, emphasizing a popular discourse of individual morality over societal wrongs. In Clooney's first scene, for example, he argues with the commanding officer, claiming, "I don't even know what we did in this war!" (Note to the reader: in this essay I refer to protagonists by actor's rather than character's name since actors' race and nation form an important part of my argument.)

Three Kings was largely marketed with Clooney's name as the principal star, and his character is particularly emblematic of the outlaw hero. He is a member of the special forces, lending him a certain "cool" mystique among the younger U.S. protagonists, and is the one in charge of their mission. He is the main outlaw, and perhaps the one whom the audience is most inclined to follow. Therefore his "reform," for he is the one who ultimately makes the decision to rescue the civilians, is in some ways the most important to spectator identification.

By having the protagonists not identify with their superior officers, the script sets up a narrative line immediately gratifying to viewers. Also, in social terms the film implies that U.S. moral injustices are faceless and institutional, caused by politicians and the military system. Injustice does not result from the actions of U.S. rebels and individualists such as these soldiers nor, by implication, from film spectators who identify with the film's outlaws. In fact, in righting the wrongs of the United States, the protagonists as outlaw heroes provide the viewers with morally superior figures with whom to identify. Ideologically, the narrative trajectory of the outlaw heroes in this problem film, as described by Ray, facilely eclipses director Russell's stated goal—to subvert "the sense of satisfaction you [the viewer] had as a moral victor, as an American."

Moral progression in the character development

Three Kings has the protagonists grow ethically until they are the film's moral center. In this way, the plot fits well into traditional liberal discourse, where moral growth is read as "victory." Such a "moral twist" in *Three Kings* made reviewers laud the film as progressive. Yet this kind of narrative twist is hardly original. It is part of a narrative mechanism of irony well known to spectators and fitting within discourses of otherness; similar progressions within the protagonist's conscience take place, for example, in such widely varying films as *Dances with Wolves* and *Spies Like Us*. The ironic mechanism functions in *Three Kings*' script to demonstrate how the protagonists' moral shift is a victory, yet by the script focusing on that victory, it somehow compensates for the failures of the war itself. In this way, the narrative trajectory allows viewers to accept that larger social immorality will remain unchanged.

In addition, as Sharon Willis argues, this use of irony relies on creating a sense of distance between spectator and film narrative that ultimately lessens any sense that the storyline is connected to social reality. Audience investment in films that employ ironic distance, Willis notes, involves a certain trust in the "ironic cool" of the film "to manage our reaction, to catch us up and bring us back laughing" (152).

At several points, the film seems to be engaged in social critique, but it is only drawing our attention to the war's minor contradictions without confronting major issues. For example, when the protagonists break into an Iraqi bunker, they find Iraqi soldiers with stockpiles of top brand stereos and U.S. exercise machines in rooms just down the hall from imprisoned civilians. In this way, the film shows equal greed on both sides.

But its critique of the larger political and institutional aspects of the war is shallow. For example, in the film's opening scene, as Wahlberg shoots an Iraqi soldier seemingly out of mere confusion, the camera focuses on Wahlberg's look of horror as he watches the Iraqi die. The message here is that "war is wrong" without the film's going into the specifics of the institutional and historical framework of U.S. military engagement in Iraq.

Binary representations of the other

In the way that they move from thievery to self-sacrifice, the protagonists experience a moral shift that sets up the completion of their neocolonial mission; they need to learn not to see the Arabs as other. Yet even in its attempt to portray understanding of the other, the film does not escape the trap of the neocolonial self/other mechanism. The script still collapses the other into the logic of the self. Throughout most of *Three Kings*, the Arabs are portrayed in binary representations as oversimplified good and bad characters. The Iraqi soldiers in the film are brutal, cowardly, immoral, and childishly dependent on Saddam Hussein, who is characterized as embodying pure evil. The Iraqi civilians are sharply delineated from the Iraqi soldiers and are depicted as innocent, non-military women, children, and prisoners.

A good example of these oversimplified binary characterizations occurs in the climactic scene in which the protagonists make their seemingly difficult decision to complicate their own mission of collecting the gold in order to save a group of Iraqi civilians. On the insistence of the U.S. protagonists, the Iraqi soldiers bring several civilian prisoners out of the bunker while the U.S. soldiers retrieve the gold. Then the Iraqi soldiers, attempting to restore order among the remaining civilians, are shown beating a small child with her arm in a cast. When the prisoners are brought out, as a woman breaks away from the soldiers and runs to greet her bound and gagged husband, an Iraqi soldier wearing dark sunglasses pulls the woman away and coldly and quickly shoots her in the head. The young child runs and weeps over her mother's dead body.

In this scene, the Iraqi soldiers are marked as so bad and the civilians as so good, they form an obvious caricature. Shooting an innocent woman attempting to greet her imprisoned husband in front of their injured child results in an over-the-top cliché of good vs. evil. Discussing U.S. colonial cinematic representations, Shohat and Stam have found similar binary representations of the other in the Western, where different tribes of Indians become classified as good or bad Indians. Shohat and Stam further argue that such a binarism "persists… even in revisionist, 'pro-Indian' [or 'pro-Arab'] films" (67). Thus in the same way that a film like *Dances With Wolves*, which attempts to show a sympathetic and realistic view of Indians, still sets up the binarism of good/bad Indian, so does *Three Kings* fail to escape the "colonial splitting of good/bad natives" still present in neocolonial films (67).

This type of representation shows how neocolonial ideology rarely imagines the other apart from the dichotomy of good, noble, and idealized, or bad, savage, and villainized. In the way such ideological tropes work themselves out in *Three Kings*, the Iraqi civilians play a part assigned to them that limits them to being victims. Their identities are defined in opposition to Iraqi villainy and in a relation of (inferior) helplessness to the U.S. soldiers. Iraqis are not depicted in terms of their own subjectivity.

Even when the Iraqi characters gain some power so as to escape a victimized position, their empowerment comes about only on the colonizer's terms. They can only demand that the U.S. soldiers help them escape, referencing the same colonial discourse of the natives' "inbred dependency on the leadership of White Europeans [or Americans]" (Shohat and Stam 140). Thus although the film depicts Iraqi soldiers as "bad guys" and Iraqi civilians as "good guys," the narrative reduces both to "other." The script's attempt to "humanize" Iraqi civilians does not grant them a chance to present a local perspective on the war or to lay claim, in the trajectory of narrative identificatory positions, to the category of self.

Continued: The exception that proves the rule

Exception that proves the rule

Developing a more complex characterization of the “enemy,” this visualization of an Iraqi torturer’s baby being killed by American bombs invites the viewer to sympathize with that man and consider his motives. The script here gives the torturer complex psychological traits. But it does not give him the most basic marker of identity—a name.

Point of view shot of the Iraqi as seen by his captive, Mark Wahlberg. In contrast, close-up and point of view shots are not given from the Iraqi’s torturer’s perspective.

Significantly, at one point in *Three Kings* an Iraqi character is portrayed differently. This occurs in the scene in which Wahlberg is captured and tortured by Iraqi soldiers. The torturer’s character (played by Saïd Taghmaoui) indicates a contradiction within the film’s representational scheme. Despite the fact that he is torturing the U.S. soldier, Taghmaoui is presented as a victim of U.S. neocolonial oppression, a humanized character who does not fit into binary categories of good vs. bad Arab. Taghmaoui is given attractive psychological traits, such as sympathy and understanding. His dialogue presents unique insights into Arab-American relations. For example, he says:

> What is the problem with Michael Jackson? ... A black man make his skin white and his hair straight... Your sick fucking country make the black man hurt himself just like you hurt the Arabs and children over here.

In this statement, the dialogue equates U.S. racism with U.S. neocolonialism, a parallel that the rest of the film shies away from making, as I will explore below. Taghmaoui also speaks about a son he had who was killed by U.S. bombs. He asks Wahlberg to imagine how the American would feel if his own daughter were bombed. Both scenarios are visualized, inviting viewers to sympathize with the Iraqi. Thus the film situates this character as not just a victim or oppressor.

In the narrative, Taghmaoui as torturer functions in a way that is common in Hollywood scripts that deal with complex social contradictions or current political conflicts. The story often has characters who reject dominant U.S. social values yet are assigned a role that ultimately recuperates Western culture and, more specifically, hegemonic U.S. ideology. The film’s representation of the

Iraqi torturer is surrounded by narrative paradoxes which contradict the explicitly critical nature of what he says. The script gives his character complex psychological traits, but it does not give him "the most basic marker of identity: a name." As Shohat and Stam note, this is a common narrative strategy in Hollywood, where a name is often denied to "ethnic" characters, with the effect of limiting their humanization on screen(227).

Wahlberg during the torture scene is depicted in emotional close up.

During the scene, the visual style makes Wahlberg the figure whom viewers focus on since the action is presented from his point of view, with close-ups emphasizing his character's emotional state. In contrast, close-up and point of view shots are not given Taghmaoui. The script and the visual style position the U.S. soldier as the character with whom the viewer can most easily identify. At the end of the scene, when Wahlberg is freed, he is given an option of revenge but will not shoot Taghmaoui, who just tortured him. Thus, the scene's punchline is to recuperate the U.S. soldier-thief's humanity so that narratively Taghmaoui's complex depiction gets left behind. In this way, the scene's "punctuation mark" of Wahlberg's lifesaving act leaves viewers with less concern about the Arab's humanity, thereby allowing the Arab much less subjectivity.

At the end of the torture scene, Wahlberg has the chance to shoot his torturer but chooses not to. This scene's emotional "punchline" thus recuperates the U.S. soldier-thief's humanity so that narratively the torturer's complex depiction gets left behind.

The torture scene functions then to reveal something important about the U.S. soldier-protagonist and how his character is affected by the complex identity of the Iraqi torturer. The importance of the scene in the script is to show the evolution of the American's psychology; he must come to understand the human nature of Arabs in general so that he may complete his neocolonial "civilizing" mission. After Taghmaoui gives a critique of U.S. neocolonialism, Wahlberg gets the last word, which reinforces the seeming justice of his country's military mission:

> You invaded another country. You can't do that ... 'cause it makes the world crazy. You gotta keep it stable ... Too much bombing is crazy, but not saving Kuwait.

Ice Cube's character did manual labor before the war...

Despite the film's critique of the Persian Gulf war, this statement shows how the protagonists still believe that the U.S. military is correct to invade Iraq. A closer look at military history would, in fact, reveal another picture of the origins of the 1991 war. As William Blum analyzes the build-up in his book, *Rogue State*, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was "encouraged by the United States and provoked by Washington's close ally, Kuwait, itself; an invasion that gave the US all the pretext it needed to take action," and that "saving Kuwait" actually meant restoring an undemocratic set of billionaires to power (Blum 160).

...Mark Wahlberg's had a white collar job...

Ice Cube and the film's use of African Americans

...and Spike Jonze's was a lower class "redneck." The film generally displaces racist attitudes onto him.

Hollywood often tries to soften the racial dichotomy of white/other by using actors/characters of color, especially when the film's protagonist is a group. In *Three Kings* one of the group of thieving soldiers is African American, Chief Elgin, played by Ice Cube. Even though he is not white, as a U.S. soldier, Ice Cube's character is allowed at least partial membership into the category of characters whom the film depicts in terms of "self," constructed in opposition to the foreign non-whites. In a scene early in the film, Cube is angered by the word "dune coon" spoken by Spike Jonze, playing Conrad Vig, an uneducated white Southerner:

In its use of Ice Cube, the film incorporates stereotypes of black athleticism. Here he destroys a helicopter by hitting it with a football strapped with explosives.

Cube: I don't give a shit if he's from Johannesburg, I don't wanna hear 'dune coon' or 'sand nigger' from him or anyone else.

Jonze: The captain uses those terms.

Wahlberg: The point is that 'towel head' and 'camel jockey' are perfectly good substitutes.

Cube: Exactly.

Although this dialogue overtly uses irony to joke about substituting one form of racism for another, the explicit mention of race here narratively serves to differentiate Ice Cube's character from the Arabs in the film. Cube agrees that racism against Arabs is okay as long as it does not draw on racism against African Americans. Such differentiation indicates an aspect of neocolonial discourse found in many Hollywood movies, “separating North American blacks from the demonology that would be directed to third world people” (quoted in Dyer 66).

Ice Cube and the Arabs pray together. The discourse of the Other commonly shows people of color as reliant on mystical approaches to living, as opposed to rationality.

Additionally, in this scene U.S. racist attitudes towards African Americans are spoken by a character presented as stupid, naïve, and lower class. Because the film has a relatively complex structure that appeals to educated, middle class viewers, the script here effectively dodges middle class racism, such as that which might be practiced by the Wahlberg character and spectators who are set up to identify with him.

Although Cube’s character is more complex than this, it still reinforces stereotypical and liberal discourses of blackness. In the film Cube comes from Detroit, a city known for its urban-center, working-class, black population, and he uses ungrammatical street slang. The script constructs him as lower class, a stereotype contrasted to Wahlberg, who is white. Both characters must be also read in terms of the actors’ extratextual images. Ice Cube and Mark Wahlberg (or “Marky Mark”) both gained prominence as rap artists, which has lower class connotations. But in the film, Wahlberg, as white, is scripted as more middle class. For example, he is shown working in an office before the war wearing a suit and tie. Cube’s character, on the other hand, is shown working a manual labor job. In the film, Cube cannot transcend the common film image of the lower class black man.

In addition to his lower class standing, Cube is also presented as possessing greater athletic abilities than his white counterparts, as seen when he destroys a helicopter by hitting it with a football strapped with explosives. This echoes the U.S. cultural trope of blackness as athleticism, emphasizing the black body rather than the mind (Dyson 66). At the same time, Cube plays the most religious of the U.S. characters, relating to liberal discourse defining blackness as the center of spirituality and morality. He seems untouchable because of his spiritual nature, and in the film he is the only U.S. character that is not shot, killed, or tortured.

This mysterious “good luck” plays into discourses of the other in general and of African Americans in particular, seen culturally as romanticized, steeped in mystery that cannot be understood, reliant on mystical rather than logical means of living. As Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins point out, such a focus on mysterious powers “can be consistent with a view of the other as superstitious or irrational and might be responsible for contempt for the native [or non-white] mind” (91). All these discourses around race let viewers perceive the other as irreducible to the logic of the self. In *Three Kings* the script positions Ice Cube’s character at least partly as this other.

Discourses of realism

Although David O. Russell may have made claim to a project of producing an unconventional film in terms of content and style, as discussed earlier, this unconventionality does not create the kind of disruption that would place the film outside of the Hollywood mass market. Ideology in film works through integrating the viewer into certain “taken for granted” forms of style and discourse, and *Three Kings* is no different than any other Hollywood film in this respect. The film’s deviations in terms of visual style are limited to a few overblown scenes making use of distortion, slow motion, and special camera lenses. In particular, one much talked-about scene shows the path of a bullet as it enters a human body and was purportedly filmed inside a cadaver. Yet, in general, the visual style resembles that of a typical Hollywood action film.

Though the unconventionality of *Three Kings* is shallow, its narrative complexities denote its involvement in discourses of realism. Although the film may not entirely re-orient our perceptions of the Gulf War, its convoluted representations of otherness reveal an attempt to create images in opposition to the mainstream. Such an oppositional stance often accompanies discourses that make claims to realism, which have the goal of showing a “real” as opposed to a mainstream, “false” view. The visual style of the film similarly may have aimed to contribute to such realism (though unsuccessfully) since Russell said it lent the film “an out of control and real feeling.” In fact, most of the film does not depart from mainstream U.S. media images of the 1991 Gulf war, which villainized Saddam Hussein, portrayed the civilians as one-dimensional victims, and mainly supported the U.S. military mission (Shaw).

What is more disturbing, though, is any belief that fictional characters and stories can present some true reality. Wahneema Lubiano questions such a discourse of realism when she suggests that attempts to construct some filmic "reality" overlook the question of who judges what is real and how. Furthermore, she argues that realism in fiction establishes a false claim to truth and allows for surface chaos in a narrative that ultimately moves towards closure; this describes the structure of *Three Kings*. Hoping to present characters that are authentic due to their oppositionality ends up essentializing and homogenizing differences (Lubiano 98-111). Such an ideology also recalls the history of film documentary and its long ties to colonialism. For example, early colonial travel films which were "the heirs of a tradition of exhibitions of 'real' human objects" (Shohat and Stam 107).

If we understand how the film lays certain claims to being outside the Hollywood mainstream but is not particularly unconventional, that lets us understand its reception and meanings. Its limited unconventionality guarantees it will not be politically subversive in terms of the discourses and images which it presents. Films like *Three Kings* commonly have a commercial success because they have the potential to let viewers feel that they understand the world in a broad way and with this film are actively moving beyond their boundaries. In fact, such films reinforce mainstream ideologies. They end up limiting subversiveness by narratively limiting contestation. I would argue that these types of films are more ideologically dangerous than more conventional films and therefore call for closer examination to reveal their underlying assumptions and convoluted meanings.

New war, same old story

Obviously, U.S. ideology surrounding Arabs is not monolithic. President Bush, for example, certainly makes some distinction between different Arabic nations; his stake in oil companies means that he is allied with certain countries and leaders in the Middle East. Within the United States, there are many different organs of propaganda, each transmitting slightly different messages. However, it is impossible to deny that the popular media in the U.S. for the most part presents an oversimplified and largely negative view of Arabs, and that little else is available to the majority of Americans.

Today, as Bush's political machine attempts to convince the American people that attacking Iraq once again is inevitable and necessary, the media recycles the same neocolonial discourses and representations of Arabs. We are told that it is impossible to know whether or not Saddam Hussein has "weapons of mass destruction," and our mediated sources of information agree, telling us that the Arabic world is mysterious and can never be known, and that Arab leaders are evil and irrational. Events of the last year and a half have widened the gap between Arab and American, making it possible to advance a neocolonial theory about the need to control and dominate that unknown territory, more recently disguised as an ubiquitous "war on terrorism."

Filmic representations of the Arab world have also remained largely the same. Since September 2001, a barrage of war films have flooded our screens, doing much to glorify military intervention. *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001), for example, portrays a war in an Arabic nation: the Somalian crisis. Similar to *Three Kings, Black Hawk Down* was partly marketed and received as depicting an alternative or unconventional view of the war; like *Three Kings*, the film tells the same old neocolonial tale. Both films rely on demonizing the Arabic leaders, offer no contextual information on a political struggle, and portray Arabs as one-dimensional, either good or evil, characters. As Monbiot writes of *Black Hawk Down* he aptly describes it as "the story the American people need to tell themselves… a battle between good and evil, civilization and barbarism" (par. 10-11). He further relates the film to the war on terrorism, during which crisis it was released:

> What we are witnessing in both *Black*

> *Hawk Down* and the current war against terrorism is the creation of a new myth of nationhood. America is casting itself simultaneously as the world's saviour and the world's victim; . . . on a mission to deliver the world from evil. This myth contains incalculable dangers for everyone else on earth. (par. 14)

This is not a new myth. It began with the white man's burden, and continues with George Bush's bogus war. Perhaps the real work involved in winning over the American people to the new war on Iraq has already been done, since the media images of terrorism and the Arabic world have been drilled into our head since the colonial era. *Three Kings* contributes to the neocolonial struggle for perpetual international control, a battle in which film has always been a major weapon.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Contemporary Singapore filmmaking: history, policies and Eric Khoo

by Tan See Kam, Michael Lee Hong Hwee and Annette Aw

12 Storeys
(dir. Eric Khoo, 1997)
Frame analysis

1. *Opening scene:* The film is set in HDB public housing. Mandarin subtitles translate an English language radio broadcast: "It is now Sunday morning." ...

... Meng jogs in a noticeably deserted HDB estate. Radio plays (subtitles): "How are you, my listeners..".

Our paper offers a brief history of contemporary Singapore filmmaking, as seen in the context of both public and private initiatives since the last decade to revive a once vibrant local filmmaking industry.[1] During the "revival" period, the independent production company, Zhao Wei Films, owned by Eric Khoo, has been one of the most active players. Sometimes this company produces wholly independent works and sometimes it makes movies in collaboration with state film bodies such as Singapore Film Commission (SCF) and Raintree Pictures. In this paper, we analyze only the former corpus of Khoo's work, that is, his early films from 1990-1997,[2] with a particular focus on what has been regarded as the "breakthrough"[3] film of the "revival" period, *12 Storeys* (in Chinese: *Shi Er Lou*; [4] dir. Eric Khoo, 1997).

We analyze Khoo's work in relation to contemporary Singapore society, against the background of local filmmaking practices and policies. Positing the films as counter-discourse, we investigate their complicated role in the way they comment on state practices and ideology, directly or indirectly offering a critical response to PAP-dominated political culture.[5] As critique, the films represent a growing awareness among the current generation of independent filmmakers about the need to provide alternative ways of "seeing" the nation-state. That is to say, Khoo's early films would approximate the kind of "critical requisite" which the cultural critic Kuo Pao

... Two HBD neighbors in the local playground keep their distance from each other. Meng works out while San San sits on a bench. ...

... San San in the HDB elevator with the young Chinese man who will soon jump to his death from this building.

2. The ghost. Spirit the ghost looks at his dead body. Khoo's use of the ghost works against a popular belief that ghosts do not manifest themselves in daytime...

Kun has called for:

> The rise of the knowledge economy initiated a paradigmatic shift... The collective mentality which served the country well in its industrialization phase is rapidly becoming redundant. Individual initiative marks the character of the new labour, something a dominant state and a compliant people decidedly lack... If [art] was at all dismissible in the past, it has now become a critical requisite in the nurture of children for the knowledge society.[6]

Contemporary Singapore filmmaking: a portrait

> Film in Singapore developed in a unique historical situation, as part of a multi-ethnic and multicultural society, reflecting the city's demographic and cultural variety...[F]rom the earliest years, film production in Singapore has been subjected to a variety of cultural, economic and political influences: Chinese, Indian, British, Japanese, American and Malay.[7]
>
> ---------
>
> You know you're watching a [contemporary] Singaporean movie, when ...
>
> •There's a reference to food or money in the title (*Mee Pok Man*, *Chicken Rice War*, *Money No Enough* and all their copycats).
>
> •Singlish[8] is uttered with a vengeance, after being chased out of TV.
>
> •A three-degrees-of-separation chart for every movie reveals a link to Eric Khoo or Jack Neo.

... Spirit the ghost sees his former self in a pool of blood....

... Spirit the ghost squats next to his grieving parents who are estranged physically and psychologically from each other, even in their grief.

> •The soundtrack lets you hear great Singaporean music you never knew existed, like from Tanya.
>
> •You spot the all-too-familiar faces of TV actors, and realize there are no bona fide movie stars in Singapore anyway.[9]

Emerging hesitantly in prewar colonial Singapore,[10] the local filmmaking industry boomed in the postwar years. It then ended when Cathay Organisation's Cathay-Keris Studio (established in 1953) closed in 1972, some three years after Shaw Organisation (founded in 1924) shut down its studio, Malay Films Production (MFP, established in 1947).[11] Cathay-Keris' demise in post-independent Singapore[12] in the early 70s marked the end of a golden era of local filmmaking. Together, the two studios made some 300 Malay language movies,[13] which reportedly had reached numerous ethnic communities. These postwar films were variously directed by Indians, Filipinos and Malays, and were financed by Chinese magnates. All featured Malay actors, most trained in Bangawan, Malay opera.

The PAP-led government did not come to the aid of the once vibrant filmmaking industry. Its policies for the newly independent country were generally based on developmental economism, which emphasized rapid industrialization and modernization. This emphasis accompanied the political rise of Singapore as a one-party dominated, depoliticized, technocratic and administrative nation-state, a phenomenon coinciding with the PAP government's social engineering policies.[14] It also led to increasingly strict media censorship.[15] These factors, together with the government's anathema towards developing infrastructures in the domain of culture and the arts by way of funding, training or education, contributed to the eventual demise of local filmmaking activities.[16] During this period, Shaw Organisation and Cathay Organisation continued to be the major film distributors and exhibitors serving the domestic market, which in the meantime grew and expanded steadily.

In the 1990s Singapore saw a gradual re-emergence of local commercial filmmaking activities, beginning with the controversial *Medium Rare* (dir. Stan Barrett and Arthur Smith,[17] 1991), which if nothing else, revealed a lack of local filmmaking talent and related professional expertise.[18] The filmmaking "revival" period came about through a combination of initiatives from both the public and private sectors, including that of entrepreneurial individuals. The PAP government's efforts to expand the service sector in response to the recession of the mid-1980s included identifying filmmaking as a service industry and a potential economic growth area.

Then the government pushed for Singapore to become a regional hub for international film production and distribution with state of the art media production and postproduction facilities. This push saw the setting up of filmmaking and related media studies programs at local tertiary institutions. Educational grants that funded overseas training for film industry professionals also became available. To encourage investments in media related projects, the government further offered attractive tax break packages to joint capital ventures. Meanwhile stringent film censorship rules were "liberalized." This resulted in 1991 in an age-based film classification system, which allowed for more product variety, and the relaxation of censorship also led to the mushrooming of cineplexes, showing mostly overseas films.[19]

Peaking in 1999, and extending into the new millennium, the revival period has generated a total of 37 feature films.[20] Mostly on celluloid, they also include six DV-films, with the first, *Stories About Love* (dir. James Toh, Abdul Nizam[21] and Cheah Chee Kong),[22] released in 2000. Two of these DV-films, *Stamford Hall* (2000) and *Hype* (2001), are amateur attempts by university students. Otherwise the "revival" films are all professional efforts. They generally draw upon established genres such as family drama, horror, action thriller, comedy and farce, and they may be grouped into three production-types: local independent productions, local+transnational collaborations, and local+Hong Kong coproductions.[23]

Productions in the first category do not receive any form of financial assistance from the state: they are the efforts of independent producers. The second category does not preclude wholly independent productions, but it additionally contains semi-independent (with finances from state film bodies) and wholly state productions. That which most distinguishes the first two production-types is the local and transnational divide in the creative aspect. In local independent productions, the director(s) would all be local. This is also generally the case with the cast. Examples include *12 Storeys* (1997) and *Stories About Love* (2000). This is not always the case of local+transnational collaborations since the directors and lead actors concerned may be foreign, though not exclusively so; examples include *Medium Rare* (1991), *Liang Po Po—The Movie* (in Chinese: *Liang Po Po*; dir. Teng Bee Lian, 1999), *Song of the Stork* (dir. Jonathan Foo and Nguyen Phan Quang Binh, 2002).[24]

Continued: Ethnicity and Singapore film production

Ethnicity and Singapore film production

Finally the third category refers to joint ventures between local and Hong Kong producers; the former may involve independent or state film bodies. Such coproductions would have a multinational cast, though mainly with actors of “Chinese” origin, be they from Singapore, Hong Kong or Taiwan. The directors are invariably from Hong Kong—for example, Derek Yee with *The Truth about Jane and Sam* (in Chinese: *Zhen Xin Hua*; 1999), Gao Lin Pao with *Lucky Number* (in Chinese: *Bailiu Libai*; 1999) and Oxide Pang and Danny Pang with *The Eye* (in Chinese: *Jian Gui*; 2002). The local producer in this instance is most likely Raintree Pictures, the filmmaking arm of the government-owned Media Corporation of Singapore, or MediaCorp; MediaCorp also manages the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) and Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS).

In the first two types of production, the local directors are mostly young Chinese-Singaporeans, under the age of 35 at the time of their feature debut. Some had overseas training. For example, Eric Khoo of *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and Lim Suat Yen of *The Road Less Travelled* (in Chinese: *Guidao*; 1997) respectively went to film school in Australia and United States. Other directors such as Colin Goh of *Talkingcock — The Movie* (2002; DV-film) and Royston Tan of *15— The Movie* (in Chinese: *Shi Wu*; 2003) are largely self-taught. Some older directors come from the TV industry, including MTV, for example, Jack Neo with *That One No Enough* (in Chinese: *Na Ge Bu Gou*; 1999), Daisy Chan with *The Tree* (in Chinese: *Haizi Shu*; 2001) and Jonathan Foo with *Song of the Stork* (2002).

Actors and actresses similarly come from diverse backgrounds. They include local TV celebrities (e.g. Jack Neo, Zoe Tay and Gurmit Singh) and stage performers (e.g. Lim Kay Tong and Lucilla Teoh).

h Ling and I worked

At San San’s household in *12 Storeys*, San San has her first flashback of her late mother. The old woman says, in Cantonese, “Ah Ling and I worked...” Her words may contain a hidden reference to a lesbian relationship...

All you do is sleep and eat.

... San San in her kitchen with Spirit next to her. San San rehashes traumatized memories. Her mother had constantly verbally abused her, with the mother’s voice here saying, “All you do is sleep and eat.” In narrative terms, Spirit’s appearances in the film are narratively unmotivated. He “happens” to appear in scenes, an omnipresent and "invisible" leitmotif. ...

... San San cries. A cut across the 180° line shows Spirit sitting behind her, not as a scary specter but as an ordinary person. ...

... The narrative has established Spirit's peacefulness. In using this character, *12 Storeys* eschews horror genre suspense, eerie music, or rapid mood changes in the mise en scene. ...

Others are amateurs, including real-life street kids (e.g. Shaun Tan and Melvin Chen of *15—The Movie*[25]). Yet others are big names from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, for instance, Aaron Kwok Fu-sing (*AD 2000*; in Chinese: *Gong Yuan 2000*; dir. Gordan Chan,[26] 2000), Angelica Lee Sin-jie (*The Eye*, 2002) and Chutcha Rujinanon (*The Eye*), respectively, or relatively unknown American actors such as David Calig (*Tiger's Whip*; dir. Victor Khoo,[27] 1998). Finally homegrown "Chinese" actors and actresses appear in all the three categories of productions, usually in a lead role. "Other" local races mostly get minor, supporting roles, with the exception of Andrea De Cruz (*Tiger's Whip*) and Gurmit Singh (*One Leg Kicking*; dir. Khoo Koh, 2002); both are local TV personalities.

The cumulative effect of this casting practice makes Singapore on film look like, as Colin Goh puts it, "some amorphous Chinese city." Asserting that this is not the Singapore he knows ("I have friends from every race"), Goh, a Chinese-Singaporean lawyer turned freelance cartoonist and then filmmaker, thus directed *Talkingcock—The Movie* (2002) with "a multiracial cast picked from the street."[28] This DV-film and other "revival" films provide a stark contrast to the movies of the golden period.

Past era films chiefly starred Malay actors and featured Malay characters. In contrast, none of the "revival" films uses Malay dialogue. Instead the dialogue now contains the gamut of English, Mandarin, local Chinese dialects, Singlish and their permutations and combinations. While reflecting the country's multiracial and multicultural character, this language mixture also suggests the marginal role the indigenous Malay language (or for that matter, Indian languages) plays in contemporary Singapore society.

The production crew may have a multiethnic configuration, but present day independent film companies are akin to Cathay-Keris and MFP in that they are in "Chinese" hands. These quotation marks signal that the "Chinese" are now Singapore nationals (as opposed to emigrants from China or colonial subjects of British Malaya), and that these companies, being independent, do not operate on a studio system with a stable of filmworkers on regular payroll.

Cathay Organisation's production output in recent years has not amounted to its making a comeback in

... San San sits on her bed, alone....

... In the reverse shot, Spirit is sitting at her side, looking friendly. His appearance here is not shocking to the viewer....

... In Spirit's final appearance in *12 Storeys*, he stands behind San San on the HDB common balcony and gives her a hug, which she cannot feel.

the filmmaking business. It did make *Army Daze* (dir. Ong Keng Sen, 1996), *A Chinese Ghost Story—The Animation* (in Chinese: *Xiao Qian*, dir. Tsui Hark,[29] 1997), and *That One No Enough* (1999).[30] As Cathay's chief executive, Meileen Choo, put it at the time of *Army Daze*,

> [I]f we do one movie a year, it will help the local film industry get a start.[31]

Cathay Organisation has yet to make another film since *That One No Enough*, but it still focuses on distributing and exhibiting films, as does Shaw Organisation.[32] As distributors and exhibitors, both companies face stiff competition for a share of the immensely lucrative local market from their business rivals, especially the GV chain of cinemas formed in 1992,[33] which now owns the most screens.[34]

As film consumers, Singaporeans have many choices. In addition to local films, they literally have at their feet mainstream movies, art house films and/or indies from East Asia (China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea and Taiwan), Southeast Asia (e.g. the Philippines and Thailand), North America (United States/Hollywood and Canada), Europe (e.g. Britain and France), and Australia and New Zealand. Singaporeans are some of the world's most avid film consumers. On average, between 1991 and 2001 viewers here spent in excess of S$100 million per year on movie tickets.[35] Such statistics make local producers and their supporters look for a renewal of the once vibrant local filmmaking economy. Seeing promise in this movie-loving audience leads local filmmakers to aspire to success and fame, if not fortune.

Sadly, many have become a "one film wonder," with three conspicuous exceptions: Eric Khoo, Jack Neo, and Daniel Yun, all often collaborating with each other. Eric Khoo owns the independent production company, Zhao Wei Films, and is the first local filmmaker to win international critical recognition for his features, namely, *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *12 Storeys* (1997). In more recent years, Zhao Wei Films has done collaborations with government funded film bodies such as Raintree Pictures, notably, *Liang Po Po—The Movie* (1999) and *One Leg Kicking* (2001). For these films, Khoo's involvement has been that of coproducer and not director. Raintree, headed by CEO Daniel Yun, is now the country's most active film producer and has made eight feature films, mostly in collaboration with local or Hong Kong producers.

Jack Neo, on the other hand, is primarily a comedian who became a household name by hosting the TCS show, *Comedy Night* (*Gao Xiao Xin Dong*; 1995-2002), and from 2002 on, another successful TCS Chinese variety show: *Top Fun* (*Huan Xiao Dian Feng*). Neo has also worked with Khoo in two film projects, first as an actor in *12 Storeys* (1997) and then as actor, scriptwriter and coproducer for *Liang Po Po* (1999), made in association with Raintree and Zhao Wei. The script for the latter film features an immensely popular 85-year-old granny character of same name whom Neo plays on *Comedy Night*.[36] In the interim, he has scripted and acted in *Money No Enough* (in Chinese: *Qian Bu Gou Yong*; dir. Tay Teck Lock, 1998), which turns out to be the country's top grossing local film of all time.[37] In addition to *That One No Enough* (1999), he has also directed the hit-comedy, *I Not Stupid* (in Chinese: *Xiao Hai Bu Ben*; 2002), which he additionally scripts and acts in.[38] In short, Neo is not only a highly versatile TV comedian/filmmaker, but also a most bankable local film personality.

The phenomenal success of *Money No Enough* and also Glen Goei's *Forever Fever* in the same year (1998) brought about a sudden flurry of investors' interest in film. The following year saw a two-fold increase in film production, a peak that has yet to be surpassed. Of the eight local features released in 1999, three (*The Truth About Jane and Sam*, *That One No Enough* and *Liang Po Po*) were local hits, but only in the qualified sense that their domestic sales exceeded their production costs. The rest were all box-office stinkers, including *Money No Enough*'s copycat, *Lucky Number* (1999). As a consequence, investors' euphoria-driven optimism quickly subsided. If *Money No Enough* earned S$5.8 million in domestic sales, the producer's eventual share was S$400,000—slightly less than seven percent of the total domestic sale. When compared to the production cost (excluding fees),[39] this was less than 50 percent return, therefore a small profit by commercial standard. But for Singapore filmmaking to have long-term commercial prospect, local producers need to sell their films beyond the domestic market. As we shall see in the next section, Raintree's production strategies reflect such a growing awareness about distribution.

Continued: State initiatives

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State film initiatives and cultural economic policies

> Can we have a Singapore Arts Centre by just bringing all the arts of the world to Singapore without our own education, without our own creativity?[40]

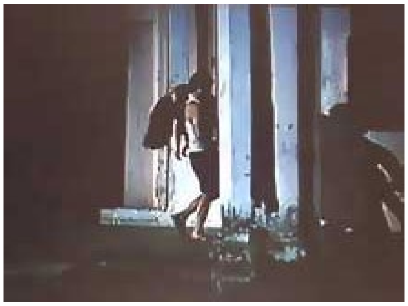
The Singapore Film Commission (SFC) and Raintree Pictures emerged in the same year as the *Money No Enough*'s success story. These two state initiatives also correspond with the official effort to remake Singapore as a "world class city," inhabited by a gracious people more interested in the finer things in life such as the arts than in mere materialist pursuits. State film initiatives as such also complement and supplement extant independent film organizations—namely, the Singapore Film Society (registered in 1958), the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF, launched in 1987), and the Substation (founded in 1991 to provide an alternative arts space).[41]

Set up with a seed fund worth S$2.5 million,[42] some five months before Raintree was founded in September 1998, SFC's mission is to address "the film industry's needs" and to "encourage, upgrade and develop Singapore filmmaking talent through training activities" by providing "funding for productions, training and film-related travel."[43] In concrete terms, SFC has granted scholarships for film-related training, held the Master's Series to promote film education,[44] and cosponsored the annual Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF). It has additionally funded local productions, occasionally collaborating with Raintree Pictures and Zhao Wei Films.

Financially better endowed than SFC, Raintree mainly does production. With Media Asia (Hong Kong), it coproduced the most costly Singaporean film, *AD 2000*. But this US$5 million (approximately S$9 million) action thriller contrasts with other

Mee Pok Man
(dir. Eric Khoo, 1995)
A visual analysis:

1. Late one night, a hit and run accident occurs near the mee pok man's noodle stall at a coffee shop. The screeching of a vehicle speeding away gets the better of his curiosity. When he goes to an alley where the sound came from, he finds Bunny lying injured in the alley...



...He carries the injured Bunny over his left shoulder. The image has the fright-night aspect of a classic horror film, including the distorted shadow on the wall. It plays on the notion of a helpless woman in the control of an ogre like man and on the monstrosity of the man and his deed. The next scene offers a grim pardody of horror: Mee Pok Man flags down a taxi and has to endure the driver's rant about the allure of women of different races and their distinct sexual smell.

2. Mee Pok Man brings the injured woman back to his HDB apartment. It does not have the trappings of a fiendish psycho but is typically working class. He tends to Bunny's injuries. The sequence has still shots and minimal camera movements, with occasional cutaways to subplots in other locations. The framing of the shots becomes increasingly tighter, indicating a growing intimacy...

...The two fall asleep and then on the soundtrack are heard Bunny's moans of pain...

revival film budgets. These range from the high of S$1 million to S$2.62 million to the moderate of S$300,000 to S$900,000 to the "shoe-string" budgets of S$18,000 to S$150,000. Although a stinker at the box office everywhere, *AD 2000* nonetheless fits into Raintree's production agenda: to make "truly international and 'borderless'" movies that would "[raise] the profile of the company in the region" and "travel beyond Asia."[45] For Raintree, finding the "right mix of local and regional talents" seems crucial. In *AD 2000*, this mix consisted of one notable Hong Kong director, Gordon Chan; one Hong Kong superstar, Aaron Kwok Fu-sing; and two TCS-MediaCorp celebrities, Phyllis Quek and James Lye. The same kind of mix characterized Raintree's other two Hong Kong coproductions, *The Truth About Jane and Sam* (1999) and *The Eye* (2002).

Another variation of this mix for the same end can likewise be founded in the two Raintree's local+transnational collaborations, *Liang Po Po* (1999) and *The Tree* (2001). The first was Raintree's debut. It was made in association with Eric Khoo's Zhao Wei Films and cast Hong Kong comic star Eric Tsang opposite Jack Neo who cross-dressed as Liang Po Po. Solely financed by Raintree, *The Tree* starred TCS-MediaCorp's soap queen, Zoe Tay, and Hong Kong star, Francis Ng Chun-yu, the latter also appearing in *AD 2000*. The films were respectively directed by TCS-MediaCorp trained Teng Bee Lian and Daisy Chan. The "regionality" of Raintree's films has also expanded to find symbolic expression in location shooting in Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand which variously make up the films' backdrops.

In addition to using local celebrities from its parent company, MediaCorp, Raintree has the added advantage of state finance that allows it to mount major publicity campaigns for its films, pay good salaries to regional stars, and partake in expensive productions, estimated by local standards. Raintree and correspondingly the MediaCorp celebrity-actors get transnational exposure. Its coproductions allow it and its stars and directors to hitch a ride into pan-Asian film markets. The government hopes such films will become significant cultural exports.

Meanwhile back home, Raintree actively fosters ties between the TV industry and the filmmaking community, especially in its predominantly local

...Mee Pok Man rushes about looking for pain killers, but Bunny throws up while trying to swallow the pills...

productions, often made with Zhao Wei Films and/or SFC. Apart from *Liang Po Po*, Raintree's other collaborations with Zhao Wei are *One Leg Kicking* (2002) and *15—The Movie* (2003), both also supported by SFC. Prior to this, SFC had one other coproduction with Raintree: *Chicken Rice War* (in Chinese: *Qiao He Ji Yuan*; dir. Cheah Chee Kong, a.k.a. CheeK, 2001). Presently, SFC has planned four more coproductions, telemovies, with Raintree.[46]

...He cleans her up...

SFC's many activities and Raintree's production strategies, whether at the local or regional and transnational level, underscore what Lily Kong has called "cultural economic policies"[47] more than cultural policies per se. In her paper, "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-cultural Agendas" (2000), Kong differentiates between these two types of policies: For her, cultural economic policies seem like cultural policies but have an economic-driven agenda; the chief aim of which is to nurture the arts as a potential cash cow for the state and to make the arts part of the state's economic base. Cultural policies, on the other hand, support cultural practitioners and the socio-cultural agenda of artists.

...and cleans the vomit off the floor...

Kong mainly attributes the prevalence of cultural economic policies to MITA (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts; formerly Ministry of Information and the Arts, formed in 1991). MITA largely oversees the promotion of artist pursuits and cultural endeavours in keeping with state "world class city" discourse. In her paper, Kong generally discusses how technocrats in government have had control over the Singapore polity since independence in 1965. In her particular analysis of MITA's public statements, it is evident that MITA's promotion of the arts has consistently sought to push Singapore in the direction of becoming an "international market for the arts," with the arts understood here as not different from rubber, spices, oil, Asian Currency Units or gold futures.[48] Not only that, cultural practitioners who object to such a push are very likely

...Framed tighter, Bunny rests in bed. Her voiceover, “I feel very safe,” is an entry in her secret diary and foreshadows a motivated cutaway to her own bedroom where her younger brother reads the diary....

to receive a quick rebuttal from the state. In this connection, the refutation (1992) from B.G. George Yeo, then Minister of MITA, is exemplary:

> Nothing is more inimical to the development of the arts than a false nationalism which tries to protect a market under the guise of safeguarding some misconceived national essence. We offer Singapore as a venue and as a stage for artists and those who enjoy the Arts from all over the world.[49]

In 1994, Yeo also said:

> If the arts in Singapore are only by Singaporeans for Singaporeans, we will get nowhere for we are too small... Singapore is Singapore only because our national spirit is a cosmopolitan one.[50]

...The shift in camera position indicates some time has passed. Mee Pok Man had cooked some rice gruel for her and now feeds her...

Such pronouncements not only negate the value of local arts and arts workers but also repudiate the socio-cultural agenda of local cultural practitioners as normative. Accordingly then, Kong concludes that the state’s 1990s cultural development policies were not really cultural policies but cultural economic policies trying to harness the economic potential of the arts.

For those not attuned to the Singapore polity, it should quickly be stressed that “film” has had an existence in state discourse for the arts as a discrete sub-category only in recent years, alongside the more traditional categories of theatre, dance, music, literature and the visual arts. Prior to this, film’s relation to the arts was implied, as demonstrated by the fact that SFC, at the time of its establishment was housed in NAC (National Arts Council), a MITA affiliate established in 1991 for promoting the arts in the nation-state. Now SFC comes under the umbrella of the Media Development Authority (MDA), a statutory body formed in 2002 through a merger of SFC, Films and Publications Department (FPD), and the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). But SFC remains in MITA’s clutches because MDA, like NAC and NHB (National Heritage Board),[51] comes under MITA’s purview. SFC’s sometime collaborator in film production, Raintree, is similarly linked to MITA, but less directly. Raintree, along with TCS and RCS, is a

Your mee-pok tastes better.

subsidiary of the government owned MediaCorp. MediaCorp's relationship with MDA is, technically speaking, that of a licensee and licenser, respectively, since MDA as the government's media watchdog is entrusted with task of granting or rejecting MediaCorp's license to operate as a national broadcaster in radio (RCS) and TV (TCS).

Our particular tracing of the government's complex organizational network for media and the arts aims to highlight the intricate relation between film, media and the arts in Singapore society. That is to say, public pronouncements about and cultural economic policies for the arts, especially those emanating from MITA, affect film and media.

Indeed if the 2000 Renaissance City Report is an indication,[52] then it would seem that MITA's cultural *economic* policies are here to stay. Produced by MITA, this report takes great care to emphasize its compliance with state discourse apropos to remaking "Singapore as a world class city supported by a vibrant cultural scene."[53] Accordingly, it "outlines the strategies required to take Singapore there." [54] A close scrutiny of the report's outlined strategies reveals more of the state's hegemonic economic-driven agenda, most evident in the following pronouncement:

> [C]reative and artistic endeavors will... play a decisive role in *the future economy* [because they have] direct *economic* benefits [and lend themselves to] arts *marketing* and cultural *tourism*.[55]

Specific to filmmaking, the report recommends:

> [that SFC] consider the *commercial viability* of building film-making facilities ... [so as] to establish Singapore as the regional hub for *post-production* work in films, [and that it should] encourage and facilitate international coproductions and collaborations involving Singapore and overseas talent.[56]

The report does not consider how local filmmaking (or for that matter, the arts in general) might develop as a socio-cultural activity in an indigenous way. However, it does say,

..Though in a daze, she recognizes him and appears more comfortable...

Nobody talks to me.

...The two strike up a conversation. The use of shot reverse shot cutting heightens their individuality, and further, it helps establish a sense of camraderie between the two.

> Culture and the arts are important to us because they enhance our quality of life, contribute to a sense of national identity and add to the attractiveness of our country. [57]

This is technocratic language at its best: Here, the use of "our" is all-inclusive, but it has discounted those who consider themselves outside this agenda—especially local cultural practitioners with a thoughtful agenda. Indeed, scrutiny of the report's professed "consultation with members of the cultural community" [58] reveals no "consultation" with any notable person in the local film scene.

Given the state's clear sense of the economic place of the arts, it is important to evaluate the degree to which independent filmmakers must work within the constraints of the state's hegemonic economic agenda. Have they found or can they find alternative modes of expression, ones which manifest a strong awareness of state hegemony but work to circumvent, even overcome, it? After all, in the context of Singapore society, the state's dominant economic agenda along with its autocratic and technocratic ways are not new to its citizenry. State policies have shaped people's lives since independence. But even if we understand the degree to which the state has shaped people's political sensibilities and sensitivities, we would not postulate that state force has ensured compliant subjectivities. The policing of boundaries is never absolute but is subject to negotiation and reinterpretation by the very people whom the state seeks to curtail with its policy net. Eric Khoo's sardonic appraisal of his career as a filmmaker neatly sums up such popular kinds of interpretation and reinterpretation. Analogically he is referring to state control, policing and surveillance of the arts:

> They used to call me the Prince of Darkness.

He says this referring to the early phase of his filmmaking career, a time when he was known for directing dark, depressing films about the Singapore underclass. Then, referring to his latter-day collaborations with SFC and Raintree, he adds somewhat self-depreciatingly,

> Now they're going to say: 'It's too mass.

> It’s too commercial. Why are you [referring to himself] selling out?’[59]

His self-mocking tone bespeaks a kind of reinterpretation that is self-empowering precisely because he uses equivocal speech imbued with heightened, ironic self-awareness. He calculatedly uses a discourse opposed to boundary setting, technocratic speech.

On this note, we now turn specifically to an analysis of Khoo’s early films, discussing them in conjunction with and as working against the above-outlined background of revival films and cultural economic policies. In so doing, we seek to address issues of artistic resistance in the face of policy policing and citizen negotiation and (re)interpretation. In this way, we analyze Khoo’s early films as counter-discourse vis-à-vis state discourse, its policies included.

Continued: Unorthodoxies of Eric Khoo’s early films

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Unorthodoxies of Eric Khoo's early films

> Singapore has often been an object of envy. For its affluence, its discipline, its skilled workforce, its immaculate streets. The Lion City prides itself on these qualities... The metropolis built on high tech and high finance dreams of becoming a Nanyang New York, a Cannes-on-the-South China Sea. Of becoming "the regional hub of the arts."[60]
>
> -----------
>
> Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* rejected the authorized image of Singapore—wholesome, clean, upgraded and upwardly mobile—to show its grittier side"[61]

A cultural practitioner of sorts, Eric Khoo is the son of hotelier Khoo Teik Puat and now the father of four boys. Together with his wife, Jacqueline Khoo, he operates Zhao Wei Films (named after their first son) from the family's crown-jewel edifice, the Goodwood Park Hotel. Zhao Wei sometimes collaborates with Raintree and SFC, which have clearly benefited from the state's cultural economic policies for the arts, but Khoo has not directed a film since *12 Storeys*, though, as mentioned earlier, he continues as a producer.

Khoo's early films (1990-1997),[62] those made prior to and inclusive of *12 Storeys*, are certainly not soothing for the Singapore mainstream. Watching the films can in fact be quite torturous, as reviewer Walter V. Addiego of the *San Francisco Examiner* (March 7, 1995) found out with respect to Khoo's controversial short, *Pain* (1994), which walked away with the Best Director and Special Achievement awards in the Singapore Short Film category at the 1994 7th SIFF. "Aptly titled," comments Addiego, who

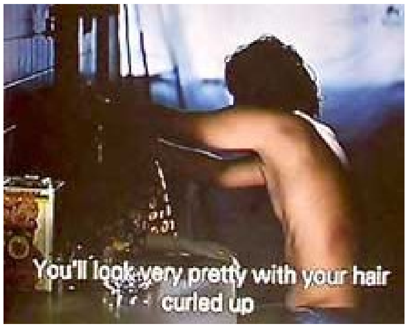
Mee Pok Man
visual analysis:

3. The necrophilia scenes: After Bunny dies, Mee Pok Man keeps her body in his apartment...

...Mee Pok Man holds the dead Bunny in hisarms and grieves. Prior to this they had sex during which Bunny died. We then see a cutaway of Bunny's brother's bedroom where the brother is reading her diary, narrated in voice over. Various shots of Mee Pok Man in his apartment follow...

...Some time later he makes an offering of food to the barely visible dead Bunny, whose arm can be seen on the table...

...He's changed his clothes, which indicates the passing of more time, as does the difference in the color of Bunny's hand...


You'll look very pretty with your hair curled up

...He strokes her hair and it falls off her scalp...

then elaborates:

> This black-and-white nightmare vision focuses on an alienated young Singaporean who acts out his sadomasochistic impulses, first on himself and then on the friendly chap who sells him cigarettes. The depiction of torture is graphic, so much so that my critical objectivity went out the window. I made it through the scene where the central figure pushes a pin into his finger. I held on when he snuffed a candle flame with his bare hand. But when he brought out the razor blade and the bowl of salt, I slumped down in my seat and shut my eyes.[63]

Khoo's other early films are less tortuous to watch but are likewise dark in tone and mood. Like *Pain*, they contain stories about, as Khoo says,

> anti-heroes...who don't function too well and have to exist within society's rules and regulations.[64]

Thus *Carcass* (co-dir. Nazir Husain, [65] 1992; hi-8 video format) focuses on the troubled relationship between a butcher and his two sons, while *Symphony 92.4* (1993; Super-8) captures poignantly the loss and isolation of an elderly Chinese man who lives alone. Both, like *Pain*, are set in urban Singapore.

The themes of loneliness and alienation in an impersonal urban environment similarly abound in Khoo's next two films, *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *12 Storeys* (1997). The first is Khoo's debut as a feature director. Its young unnamed, speech-challenged, male protagonist is a noodle hawker who lives alone and does not appear to have friends. (In terms of the film's title, *mee pok* is a Hokkein[66] name for a kind of Chinese string noodle). When not working at his stall in a shop located somewhere in the red light district, the mee pok man (played by Joe Ng) spends his free time in his HDB apartment "talking" to his late father's picture; HDB being an acronym for the

Housing Development Board, a statutory board for overseeing high-rise public housing.

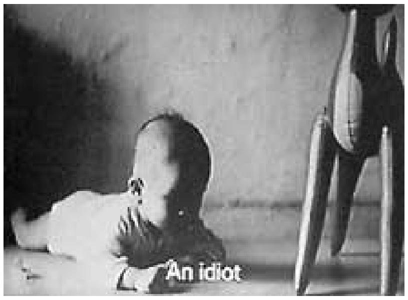
He is attracted to a disillusioned prostitute, Bunny (played by Michelle Goh), but is unable to bring himself to tell her so. A frequent customer of the hawker's noodle stall, Bunny also resides in a HDB flat. There, she does not relate well to her mother or younger brother. They hardly talk to each other, even though they live together. Bunny keeps a secret diary, but its intimate content is progressively revealed through a voiceover when her brother inadvertently discovers it and reads it. Bunny has an English lover, Jonathan Reese (played by David Brazil), and she dreams of a better life in the West, considering Reese as her potential emigration ticket. However, unbeknown to her, Reese is a porno-photographer from a European skin syndicate who preys on unsuspecting prostitutes.

One night, Bunny meets with a hit-and-run accident. As the mee pok man takes the wounded Bunny home rather than to a hospital, the narrative slips into the twilight zone (images). In his claustrophobic flat, the young man nurses her injuries and manages to win her trust. At one point, they attempt to have sex; during that attempt, she dies. Finally he keeps her corpse in his flat. Tending to it lovingly, he pours his heart out to Bunny whose body, in the meantime, has decomposed (images this page). Necrophilia in the context of *Mee Pok Man* thus becomes a powerful, deadly metaphor for critiquing a society that cannot foster healthy human relations.

With its spatial and temporal discontinuities, the montage sequence containing the film's final scenes heightens this social critique. The visual track intercuts between the mee pok man's flat and various exterior locations around the island-state (images). In these shots the outside world is filmed in the style of documentary verité. Intercut are rapid glimpses of passengers in a moving MRT train, and the HDB-scape from the windows of that train. Outside, the distant HBD housing, home to 85 percent of Singaporeans, seems assembled from Lego blocks; it looks clean, functional and yielding. Elsewhere, glistening glass and concrete towers loom tall in the Central Business District where the crowd, including immaculately dressed white-collar workers, moves

When I was a kid

... Mee Pok Man starts telling Bunny about his childhood and his experience with school bullies. There is a series of cutaways to black and white photos of him as a child...



... His baby picture. He says to her, "They [the bullies] are always making fun of me and call me an idiot...

...We hear Mee Pok Man's

sorrowful cries and the image is framed tighter. The camera then pans quietly to the left to emphasize emotional intensity. This is followed by a series of cutaways that show more childhood photos of the mee pok man, who from time to time is seen watching TV.

about as if on urgent yet futile missions.

In another part of tropical downtown Singapore, an equally faceless, nameless crowd mills about Orchard Road. Here the thick air of Christmas festivities hangs heavily over the country's shopping mecca. The view seems to present a picturesque consumer-land, with fairy lights dotting the landscape's orderly pavements, trees and mall, and concurrently throwing a cheery glow on a gigantic jolly snowman effigy around which are reindeer figurines and other motifs from the North's snowland. This collage is a compilation of still and moving shots. It gives a tourist view of affluent Singapore that stands in a surreal contrast to the mee pok man's flat, including the seedy red light district seen elsewehere in the film.

Back in the mee pok man's flat, the hawker makes an offering to his late father's photo on the wall (images). Then he proceeds to eat breakfast. His late father, for the first time in the film, makes an "appearance." Sitting next to the son silently, he watches him vacantly. The film finally ends with the mee pok man returning to bed where he snuggles up to Bunny, seeking comfort from the corpse, presently wrapped in a blanket.

In his next feature film, *12 Storeys*, Khoo takes up the theme of urban isolation and alienation in modern Singapore.[67] He develops associated motifs, taking them to another height. Here he restricts the narrative to a 24-hour period on one Sunday; the setting to one apartment block in an anonymous HDB estate, and its immediate surrounding; and the storyline to four Chinese households residing in this block. The film opens quietly. On the soundtrack is a light extradiegetic tune. Visually, we see a montage sequence that cuts together various images from the environment into the opening credits. These images include long shots of the apartment block's exterior as seen in the wee hours of a quiet morning, close ups of household objects, and portrait shots of "HDB-dwellers" in their home.

At daybreak, Meng (played by Koh Boon Pin) jogs alone in a seemingly deserted HDB estate (images). A large depressed-looking woman, San San (played by Lucilla Teoh), who turns out to be Meng's neighbor, soon turns up in this HDB-scape, as does their enigmatic neighbor, a young Chinese man (played by Ritz Lim) wearing an Astroboy tee shirt . Meanwhile, the cheerful sound of an early radio program greets the new day. Moments later, the Chinese man jumps to his death from the 12th floor of the HDB block (hence the film's title); his grieving father later remembers him as a smart son especially good at making money. This montage sequence, highlighting the lack of friendly contact between HDB-dwellers, resists official clichés for HDB housing (e.g. a friendly neighborhood), and for film critic Derek Elley, kicks in "a darker reality" that stands in sharp contrast to "the official image of Singapore."[68]

From the outset then, *12 Storeys* subtly reinforces Khoo's trademark penchant for the unorthodox. Indeed as the film progressively unfolds against a setting all too familiar to Singaporeans, using gritty realism for its visual style, it also brings in the bizarre. With a motif that recalls the necrophilia and ghostly father scenes in *Mee Pok Man*, here the dead Chinese man returns as a ghost. Khoo's handling of Spirit, the name he provides the ghost "posthumously" in the film's closing credit, similarly goes against the grain of customs and conventions.

For instance, like the ghost of the mee pok man's late father, Spirit exists in daylight contrary to local belief that specters come out at night. In terms of horror cinema, Spirit or, for that matter, the mee pok man's ghostly father, is not a horror stock character. Rather than a bloodied zombie (for example), the spirit looks just like the living, not different from breathing HDB-dwellers (images). This, together with the film's markedly unorthodox treatment for Spirit's various manifestations in the storyline, works to dampen ghostly horror. Here, ghostliness is primarily achieved apart from generic tricks of the trade. For example, Khoo eschews sudden cuts that swiftly reveal scary supernatural manifestations, including shot-reverse-shots that show the living's frightful reaction in the face of such manifestations. He also shuns eerie musical cues that foreshadow the manifestation of a paranormal presence, or rapid mood changes characterized by a shift from an ordinary environment to a creepy one.

Khoo's camerawork in this connection is like that used for the necrophilia scenes or the ghostly father scene in *Mee Pok Man*. The visual style maintains a certain detached calmness that comes with measured takes, minimal camera movements, and nominal actions from the characters, dead or alive. The camera is, for the most part, still. When it does move to reveal a particular detail in a scene, the moves, whether pans or cuts, are never sudden. These shooting and editing strategies make possible the appearance of Spirit in the narrative as unmotivated: it just happens to be there, exerting its quiet presence unobtrusively (images).

In *Mee Pok Man*, such strategies similarly help nullify the horror associated with necrophilia, and surrealistically they bring to fore the sublime beauty of the noodle seller's unconditional love for Bunny (images). That is to say, as in *12 Storeys*, the extraordinary in *Mee Pok Man* is rendered somewhat ordinary. It has no drama about it but represents a fantastical extension of the everyday. The co-existence of the dead and the living in the two films therefore establishes an analogy about the putrid in everyday life, or about the dea(r)th of everyday moralism in Singapore's rigidly ordered, capitalistic society. In *Mee Pok Man* Bunny metaphorically serves as conscientious objector (she wants to emigrate). In *12 Storeys*, Spirit serves as witness as it is privy to the comings and goings of living, dysfunctional HDB-dwellers.

As eyewitness, albeit a dead one, to events that unfold behind the close doors of four Chinese HDB-families, including the dead man's household, Spirit exerts a horrifying narrative presence, not ghostly horror but one that transgresses social decorum and propriety. It "enters" the home of others uninvited. It intrudes upon privacy, and even worse, it gains privy to the apartments' occupants' psychic world, giving hints about their dark deeds and desires. It does not sleuth but acts as a detached silent observer of the happenings behind closed doors, of the deep secrets within.

Continued: Dark side of the Singapore moon

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Dark side of the Singapore moon

For the most part, the secrets indicate severe family communication problems, between mother/daughter, parents/son, husband/wife, and sibling/sibling. (In the next section we will discuss the specific nature of these secrets.) Analogically, the storylines about secrets expand to develop a whole mood of urban alienation and isolation. The particular discursive paradigm of lack of communication extends to HDB neighbors, since the four households never talk to each other. On occasions when the households' respective members pass by each other, they maintain a "healthy" distance. Thus when San San shares a lift with her neighbor, the anonymous man before his suicide, upon seeing him enter the lift, she turns away.

Even in supposedly social and friendly environments, this turning away occurs. After marriage, Ah Gu (played by Jack Neo) minimizes his contact with buddies who usually congregate at the neighborhood coffee shop. When he and his wife happen to run into them, his first reaction is to keep up the false pretense of a happy marriage. Furthermore, in other scenes at this coffee shop where anonymous taxi-drivers, including Ah Gu's buddies, gather to exchange gossips, and to make idle conversation about current state affairs such as the caning of Michael Fay,[69] the gathering does not show a strong sense of communicative communalism.

Finally, this same theme of non-communication imbues the film's bizarre dimension. When the family —such as father, mother and ghost son—occupy the same frame, physical and psychological estrangement still prevails. Here, the parents (Mother: Tan Kheng Hua; Father: Ng Sway An) cannot establish eye contact; they sit apart from each other and speak in monologues.[70] Though clearly in deep sorrow over their son's death, they are unable to offer each other comfort. Meanwhile Spirit watches quietly; its very presence serves as an ironic amplification of the

Mee Pok Man visual analysis

4. Closing montage. The closing scenes have the feel of documentary verité and contain many rapid cuts...

...Mee Pok Man wears a tattered tee shirt and the corpse's hand is in advanced state of decay. He holds it and at one point kisses it. On the sound track is Bunny's girlish voice narrating a happy incident from her childhood. The composition of the image is like that of the earlier scene, but with closer framing....

...A series of rapidly presented unmotivated images from different locations...

...Taken from a tripod-mounted stationary camera, this scene shows the crowd at Orchard Road, the country's shopping mecca, around Christmas time. We hear the sound of chiming bells...

...Mee Pok Man in bed with the dead Bunny...

...Christmas fairy lights over Orchard Road and other shots of the decorations ensue, as seen from a

humans' inability to connect (images).[71]

All these scenarios provide an index, both literal and analogical, to dysfunctional relations in modern Singaporean society. Such relations are portrayed as ingrained and persistent. When viewed in the overall context of the film's HDB setting, *12 Storeys*' critical commentary is intensified. The housing projects were originally founded in 1960 on democratic socialist principles for "creat[ing] social justice," and provid[ing] a "'safety net' [for] ... families who did not have enough to meet their minimum needs."[72] HDB has since become a definitive statement about the PAP-led government's vision and achievements in the last 37 years (at the time of *12 Storeys*). As the pride and glory of that government, these housing developments have also granted political legitimacy to the regime.

Yet the HDB of *12 Storeys* (or for that matter, *Mee Pok Man*) tells a starkly different story. Miserable and dysfunctional HDB-dwellers here counter the official image of HDB as a successful public housing project. Indeed in consciously probing into domesticity in public high rises and in developing the attendant themes of urban isolation and alienation, Khoo's two films amount to, in the words of Cherian George, "deeply political creation[s]"[73] that reveal the dark side of the Singapore moon.

In addition to their settings and themes, both *12 Storeys* and *Mee Pok Man* are unconventional in terms of the official agenda for the arts, perhaps most exemplified by the following technocratic pronouncement:

> Performing arts in Singapore, apart from being an enrichment experience for the people, will form an integral part of Singapore lifestyle *no different from* its greenness and cleanliness, which together will affirm its position as a centre of excellence and an attractive place in which to invest.[74]

Mee Pok Man and *12 Storeys* eschew such an agenda. They are not the sort of artistic tract that government bodies such the Economic Development Board (EDB) and Singapore Tourist Board (STB) would rush to get hold of to promote Singapore as "a centre of moving vehicle...

...Bunny's younger brother in an MRT, Mass Rapid Transit Train, moving through an underground tunnel. It is not clear whether it is night or day. ...

...More shots of the Orchard Road Christmas decorations as seen from a moving vehicle. Here, a jolly snowman effigy, about 10 meters high...

excellence" and "an attractive [investment] place." Amidst Singapore's renowned "greenness and cleanliness," Khoo shows drabness and dreariness. In addition to plotlines about dysfunctional HDB-dwellers, the two films have Singaporeans of whom even mothers might be ashamed—pimps, prostitutes, and gangsters. In short, Khoo's characters are not representative of model Singaporeans. Nor are they like the much-favored "cosmopolitans," who, as Prime Minister (PM) Goh Chok Tong points out in his 1999 National Day Rally speech, would have an international outlook:

> [Cosmopolitans] speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good incomes – banking, IT, engineering, science and technology. They produce goods and services for the global market. [They frequently] use Singapore as a base to operate in the region. They can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world.[75]

Goh also gives us the converse to this paradigm, the not so highflying "heartlander" Singaporeans who

> make their living within the country. Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors ... If they emigrate to America, they will probably settle in a Chinatown, open a Chinese restaurant and call it an "eating house."[76]

The PM's highly polarized categories indicate a persistent imaginary running through governmental discourses before and after the PM's speech. These two groups have long existed as unnamed entities, especially earlier in the 90s in government discourse on globalization consequent to the advent of the Information Technology (IT) revolution. This discourse hails the interconnectivity of a borderless world made possible by the Internet. With that sense of "cosmopolitanism," the government seeks to transform Singapore into a regional/international hub for commerce and the arts as a response to the "challenges of globalization."[77] It concurrently

...Bunny's younger brother in th same train, followed by other "portrait" shots of young passengers traveling alone...

encourages Singaporeans to cast an entrepreneurial eye beyond the local. Those who have succeeded are the unnamed precursors to "cosmopolitans," while those who have not are compelled to seek their livelihood at home, and thus are here belatedly classified as "heartlanders."

The globalizing push also gives credence to the related discourse of "foreign talent," with ideas about increasing the country's talent pool and accordingly raising its talent pyramid.[78] By the time of the 1997 recession, a consequence of regional financial crisis, however, discourse about foreign talent rebounded back on the government, who had to deal with growing criticisms from the middle-class. Thus the PM also said in his 1999 address:

> Foreign talent will not take away jobs from Singaporeans. Instead [they] will create more jobs and prosperity for all of us.[79]

...An HDB estate seen during daytime from a moving train is followed by various shots of the rapid transit environment, including one of a train running along an overground track...

"Foreign talent," though not named as such until the late-1990s, previously came in the form of "foreign technological know-how" or "foreign expertise." Such expertise played a role in the country's developmentalist economism and move toward rapid modernization and industrialization. Historically, foreign elements had a revered status in the official annals, variously regarded as visionary architects, builders and developers of modern Singapore; the most exemplary was Stamford Raffles, fondly remembered as "founding father" rather than as an Englishman who colonized the island in 1819.

While we do not want to insist that Khoo's "foreign" characters indicate a direct critical response to the official discourses around "foreign talent," the various manifestations of foreign elements in Khoo's early films do depart markedly from official annals and "foreign talent" discourse. In these two films, for example, we see an "Oriental pussy" seeker from London (Reese in *Mee Pok Man*) and a scheming China-bride (Lili in *12 Storeys*[80]), and hear about a young American vandal (Michael Fay in *12 Storeys*).

...A shot, taken with a still camera on a tripod, of

Chinese-Singaporean characters in Khoo's early films, including *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*, or downtown commercial buildings. Audio is an increasingly loud drum tatoo...

...Various shots of the crowd in the commercial business district, taken from a still camera on a tripod...

...Low angle shot of landmark downtown building, the Overseas Union Bank headquarters...

"heartlanders" as the PM would put it, would not only speak Singlish but also other tongues long disowned by the government. These languages run the gamut of non-standard English and Mandarin, and local Chinese dialects such as Hokkein, Cantonese and Teochew. These are languages which the PAP-government has actively sought to rectify or eradicate from the public sphere since the 1970s. The government has assumed that these languages would impede the country's economic prosperity and international competitiveness. Their return via Khoo's early films and many "revival" films (as well as other cultural forms such as popular songs) constitute —as Chua Beng Huat might put it—a form of protest against their continuing marginalisation in state discourse.[81] At the same time, the very presence of disowned languages in Khoo's early films and elsewhere serves as a terse reminder about the state's failure in language policing.[82]

The unorthodoxies of Khoo's early films collectively undermine slickly packaged national myths built with official clichés such as "wholesome, clean, upgraded and upwardly mobile," and a country noted for "its affluence... discipline... skilled workforce...[and] immaculate streets." In this sense, Khoo's early films resist officialdom. In the next and final section of this paper, we look further at Khoo's early films as counter-discourse with particular reference to themes of secrets and secrecy in *12 Storeys*, and we also look at how Khoo's work comments on and undermines the national "Shared Values" ideology.

Continued: *12 Storeys'* secret world

To top   Print version   JC 46   *Jump Cut* home

...HDB housing units from the back, looking less clean and functional than from the front.

12 Storeys' secret world

Mee Pok Man
visual analysis

5. Closing scene in Mee Pok Man's apartment...

...In his kitchen, Mee Pok Man makes an offering to his late father, looking at his father's picture...

...The father's picture...

> The Five Shared Values:
>
> - Nation before community and society before self
> - Family as the basic unit of society
> - Community support and respect for the individual
> - Consensus, not conflict
> - Racial and religious harmony[83]
>
> ----------------
>
> [W]e're not supposed to do political films, not to do anything against any religion and then, the third one I think, is alternative lifestyles—I think that can encompass a whole spectrum of stuff...[84]

First conceived by PM Goh Chok Tong, then the First Deputy Prime Minister, in 1988, the Shared Values ideology was nationally adopted in 1993. Spelled out in the first epigraph of this section, the ideology officially proclaims a set of beliefs as part of Singapore's cultural heritage. The ideology thus proclaimed, as Gunther Kress and Bob Hodge might put it in a different context, has the modality of being real, natural, transparent, inevitable, factual, unquestionable, and doubtlessly true.[85]

With a propaganda machine supported by the mass media publicizing its launch and its ongoing regurgitation in public discourse, the ideology has a widespread, even hegemonic reach. When we did a Yahoo.com search on the phrase, "Shared Values Singapore," we found e-domains that encompass target audiences ranging from "Singapore Kids"[86] to educators and students[87] to "Expat Singapore."[88] The last website is meant for expatriates or foreign talents, living and working in the nation-state, including those who plan to do so.

These sites may hint at the pervasive extent of the e-

...Reverse shot of Mee Pok Man...

...Ghostly father against the wall...

...The late father's ghost sits and looks on vacantly while Mee Pok Man holds breakfast in his hands...

reach of the Shared Values ideology, but they do not prove that Singapore's population, locals and expatriates, has pervasively internalized it. In this connection, Khoo's early films would arguably stand as both witnesses to and contenders against the Shared Values' presumed hegemony.

12 Storeys was made four years after the Shared Values were promulgated. In terms of plot and themes, the film seems to represent a partial critical response to that ideology, partial in being ambivalent toward the fifth shared value, racial and religious harmony. In the case of *12 Storeys*, Khoo gives "race" a fleeting nod via a strategic sprinkling of multiracial snapshots throughout the film. If *12 Storeys* does not actively problematize the issue of race and religion in multiracial, multireligious, multicultural Singapore, does this constitute an act of self-censorship on the part of Khoo?

Eric Khoo makes no secret about the fact that he applied "self-censorship"[89] to *12 Storeys* when making it. His reasons were clear. He wanted to ensure a Parental Guidance (PG) rating so that the film would have a wider circulation than his earlier *Mee Pok Man*, which was slapped with a Restricted (Artist), or R(A), rating, thereby limiting its exhibition to viewers over 21 and in selected cinemas.[90] In that light, Khoo's self-censorship was both pragmatic and voluntary. Beyond this, he gives no details of what *12 Storeys* might have looked like otherwise, though he told a reporter around the time of *Mee Pok Man* that his second feature would "centre on the lives of Singapore teenagers."[91] As it turns out, the finished version of *12 Storeys* is more about HDB-families and their secrets than about Singapore teenagers and their lives.

There is therefore a gap about our knowledge of *12 Storeys* the made version and *12 Storeys* the shelved version. This gap makes a close reading of *12 Storeys* a challenge, all the more so when the film's plotline is packed with secrets of multiple shades and colors. Perhaps because of this gap *12 Storeys* would eventually have a distinctively loose narrative structure characterized by a fragmented, elliptical storytelling style. In a different context, such a style reminds us of Michael Levine's psychoanalytic study

...Mee Pok Man snuggles up to the dead Bunny's corpse, now wrapped in a blanket.

of writing under censorship, in particular his useful notion of "writer's blocks," in this case, blocks that emanate from self-censorship activities.

Khoo's self-censorship raises questions about compromises he made that result from a fear of political consequences. If this fear came from social conditioning and political immaturity,[92] it would readily challenge our thesis that *12 Storeys* has contestatory status primarily by taking official discourse as its object of critique. Here, our analysis of Khoo's social thematics is predicated upon Michael Levine's theory of self-censorship that takes such questions about or suggestions of compromise as a point of reference as well as a point of departure.[93] Generally Levine's model recognizes that censorship is endemic in all human societies so that self-censorship is an inevitable response. Because of this, Levine rejects the notion that artists' acts of self-censorship are *simply* compromises based on fear of censure from a high authority such as the state.

More pertinent to our present context is Levine's discussion of the complex relations between self-censorship and state censorship, and their bearing on producers of texts and textual production. For Levine, producers of texts (here, films) are faced with a dilemma: to pre-censor their works (since they would be, in one way or another, subject to some form of state censorship), or to allow the state to censor them on their behalf (since it is empowered to do so). The former is a private decision, while latter is an institutionalized practice. To avoid state censorship, producers of texts are thus compelled to self-censor their works in one way or another. The advantage here is that they still consciously retain creative power. As Levine points out, this type of self-censorship:

> ... is itself internally conflicted and must be understood as a practice structured by the interplay of competing forces which, on the one hand, attempt to circumvent official sanctions and, on the other, cannot help but internalize them to varying degrees as forms of writers' block.[94]

When externalized, adds Levine, the "writers' block" manifests itself in texts in the form of "narrative interruptions," "deletions, blanks and disguises," “reversals,” “distortions” and/or as games of concealment that include “excisions, approximations and circumlocutions.” Underscoring strategies of “conflict and compromise” (as opposed to just compromise), these textual elements make self-censorship “an elusive object of investigation [for the state]” since it is “difficult [for the state censor] to grasp without in turn becoming caught in its grip.” They also underscore “stylistic innovation … [that] makes another, more equivocal and double-edged style of writing possible.” The net result, says Levine, is a “positively paralyzing effect” on state censorship. Thus conceptualized, self-censorship can offer itself as a “political weapon,” albeit an unwieldy one.[95] In sum, self-censorship gives the appearance of being compliant when it may be a conscious strategy to deviate from state control and surveillance.

Put contextually, Khoo’s particular self-censorship with respect to *12 Storeys* achieved its primary goal: the film received a PG rating as intended. Being elusive, the self-censorship process is difficult here to put a finger on. In the context of *12 Storeys*, it has an uncanny relation with the film’s leitmotifs of household secrets and secrecy discourse. It is almost as if Khoo has underscored his film with a wicked private joke. “Writers’ blocks” clutter the diegesis and contribute to the film’s recurrent jarring discontinuities, often characterized by fragmented narratives, unmotivated cuts, elliptical editing and the deficiency of reaction shots. In this way, the style reveals or comments on Khoo’s self-censorship strategies. To know it is, then, to unpack the secrets, and vice versa

12 Storeys is full of secrets, so much so that all key characters have secrets to manage, conceal or divulge. These secrets are either personal or household ones and can be open, manifest, latent and/or absolute.[96] The secrets’ disclosure, whether covert or overt, is for the most part witnessed by the presumed omnipresent Spirit. In scenes where Spirit is absent, its presence is inferred, if not felt. In instances where it appears next to the “living,” it is invisible to them. (images)

Not all secrets are divulged, however. Though having privy to the secrets of others, Spirit harbors one of the film’s absolute ones: No one (including his parents and the viewers) has a clue as to why Spirit the man killed himself. By contrast, open secrets circulate in the realm of gossip, as with a passing comment with regards to Ah Gu's lack of filial piety overheard at the neighborhood coffee shop. Manifest and latent secrets, on the other hand, occur only behind closed doors, not for public purview. Latent secrets, unspoken and unspeakable, do not lend to ready representation on screen. Nonetheless they cue us into their shadowy presence by leaving traces and clues.

In his essay, "Dead Man Gazing," Michael Lee dwelled on the film's many secrets and its secrecy discourse in great detail.[97] In Spirit's household, he said, there are two secrets. One is Spirit's absolute secret. The other belongs to "his" parents. Theirs is a latent secret which hints at a highly dysfunctional family and an unspoken failed spousal relation. In another household, the failed marriage between Ah Gu (a Chinese-Singaporean) and Lili (a "China- bride" from Beijing played by Quan Yifeng) is a manifest secret; as depicted in the film, it stems from a dance of mutual lies and betrayals. In a marriage as good as over, they, especially Ah Gu, keep up the public façade of happiness.

This household has another secret: the photograph to which Lili masturbates, late at night. This photograph, showing Lili and a Chinese man (possibly an ex-lover), is an index to Lili's undisclosed past in China, her absolute secret. There is no absolute secret in the third household, but personal secrets abound. For example, the eldest child, Meng, has incestuous desires for his younger sister, Trixie (played by Lum May Yee), while young Trixie has illicit underage sex with friends. There is no sex in the final household, though it has been home to San San and her late "schizogenic mother."[98] It is not clear if San San is in fact a schizophrenic. But if she were, then the constant verbal abuse from her late mother (played by Lok Yee Loy) which she had to endure would have been a major contributory factor to her present schizophrenic-like state of existence. (images) Finally Lee suggests that in this household, there is the possible act of matricide.

Continued: a sexuality-related secret

A sexuality-related secret

To this paradigm of secrets, we would like to add one more: a sexuality-related secret. This is a latent but ultimately absolute secret. It gives a fleeting glimpse into alternative lifestyles in Singapore, or rather, a possible instance of one. As pointed out in the second epigraph of the last section, the subject matter of alternative lifestyles in local films would fall within the "OB" domain of state discourse.[99] More to the point, the sexuality-related secret, as it were, comes out during San San's first subjective flashbacks of her late mother (shot in extreme close-up), who throughout the film is relentlessly hurling verbal abuses at San San. (The late mother exists only in San San's flashbacks.) Amidst the expletives, unkind words and derogatory names she threw at the daughter, the old lady said:

> Ah Ling and I worked and saved for 20 years to buy this flat. We don't even charge you rent for staying here. Why don't you take care of this place?

What is most intriguing in these lines is the name "Ah Ling." Ah Ling is a woman's name, and it is mentioned only once in the film; that much is known. Beyond this, Ah Ling is an enigma. We learn in one of San San's later flashbacks that her late mother used to work for Rachel's (played by Neo Swee Lin) mother as a maid. From this information and from the Cantonese dialect she spoke, one could extrapolate that San San's adopted mother used to be an *amah*. Though an extinct occupation category in contemporary Singapore, *amahs* were commonly found in affluent households in the past.

In her book, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, Lynn Pan observes that the domestic phenomenon of *amahs* in East and Southeast Asia began around the 1930s when young single women emigrated from Shuntak, a county in Guangdong, south China, to work as maids.[100] *Amahs* commonly tied their hair into a pigtail and donned a *samfoo*, which consisted of a virginal white top and a pair of black trousers. These were the *amahs'* trademarks. More relevant to the present context, *amahs* were known to practice a sisterhood that celebrated spinsterhood. This practice has not been well-documented because, as Pan puts it,

> They did not like to publicize [their] arrangements among people not of their persuasion; sisterhoods were private affairs, to be kept from the world as much as possible.[101]

This, together with their "emblematical, or enigmatical, method of communication," helped shroud their private world with secrecy.

The pictorial book, *Chinatown*, gives a further glimpse into this private world when it recounts that *amahs* were:

> ... Cantonese women from the older generation [who] work[ed] in Singapore as domestic servants and remain[ed] unmarried. Many such women [would] pool [their] resources and share a cubicle to keep their personal belongings. It [was] also a meeting place. They usually ha[d] no relatives in Singapore and rel[ied] on each other for assistance.[102]

This anecdote sheds some light, albeit momentarily, on the secret world of *amahs*. First they had developed a support system for each other. As unmarried women who practiced sisterhood-cum-spinisterhood, they were not reliant on men for subsistence and livelihood. They were independent, which led to "gossip," notes Pan: "[I]nevitably, some of the more passionate friendships were [thought to be] lesbian relationships"; or in Chinese, "*mo tofu*" relationships.[103] To *mo tofu* literally means to grind beancurd, or to crush soybeans with the two flat slabs of Chinese grindstones so as to extract soy juice for making beancurd. In some contexts, *tofu* is an euphemism for breasts; *mo* is also a pun for touching and fondling. Put the three Chinese words together, one gets an erotic picture: mutual touching and fondling of breasts.

Elsewhere, in her historical account of Chinese women in Singapore, Ann Wee (1996) similarly notes that some of the *amah* alliances were of a "lesbian" variety, though she concedes that there is "no evidence that this is a major theme in their dormitory life."[104] The lack of evidence does not confirm absence; it may well be due to the *amahs'* immense success in keeping their private affairs under wrap. To a large extent, the silent code of *amah*-sisterhood would help them in their secrets and their secret world.

If Ah Ling and San San's late mother were indeed a *mo tofu* couple, then the latter, being an *amah*, would probably have had abided by that code of silence and accordingly kept their relationship from the public eye. There is, of course, no way of knowing that this was the case. That they had pooled their resources together to buy the flat nonetheless shows a deep and trusting friendship.

Local film viewers would also understand this act in the context of the HDB's purchasing scheme, which absolutely forbids non-family members from buying a HDB flat collaboratively. What this means, then, in the context of San San's household, is that the flat belonged to San San's late mother, with San San listed as occupant not as co-owner since at the time of the purchase, 20 years ago, she would have been too young. Upon her mother's death, she inherits the flat since she is "family" to the old lady. For HDB, an unmarried woman and a legally adopted child constitute a family unit.

Ah Ling, a non-family member, could never have been the flat's rightful owner nor have had legal claim to it even though she had helped pay for it. That she had knowingly put in money for it for 20 years thus reveals an enduring close friendship between her and San San's late mother, one built on mutual faith and trust. That they lived in the flat for so long similarly hints at an intimacy that was based on close partnership and companionship. Ah Ling's physical absence in the film suggests that she might have been dead; San San's late mother's advanced age also alludes to this. Furthermore, Ah Ling figures only in the old woman's speech and not visually present in San San's memory. This implies that Ah Ling was also likely to have been closer to the mother than to the daughter. Finally there appears to be no men in their lives, and San San the daughter was adopted.

When compared to Meng's sexual secret and Lili's secret love, the enigma of Ah Ling and her relation to San San's household is indeed most difficult to crack. What we have endeavored to do here is not so much insist on the possible existence of a *mo tofu* couple as the unspoken secret of this household. We hope also to show the importance of using inter- and extra-textual references to anchor the plausibility for such a reading. Such a reading strategy becomes necessary when dealing with latent/absolute secrets, or “writers’ blocks” that ensue from self-censorship activities, because we have no recourse to direct verbal speech or explicit visual clues as a means of disclosure. The name, “Ah Ling,” is a case in point. Although it appears in the direct speech of the late mother, it is in fact an indirect one because it comes to our knowledge only in San San’s memories. In this way, deciphering the film’s secrets requires a deconstructive strategy along the line of citizens’ interpretive strategies and resistant forms of communication within an authoritarian and censorious state.

***

In conclusion, families in *12 Storeys* all harbor secrets one way or another. More pertinent is the film’s portrayal of the ways secrets, whether personal or household ones, are managed, along with disclosure, discovery and/or concealment. Secrets can adversely impact communication within families and contribute to dysfunctional relations among parents, spouses, children, siblings and neighbors. For Khoo, such widespread, persistent communicational dysfunction within families, between neighbors and among individuals points to a larger level of urban isolation and alienation. These motifs in his films attack the Shared Values national ideology and other state discourses.

In *12 Storeys* and Khoo’s other early films, the neighbors avoid each other; the nation-state has not fostered mutual community support and respect for individuals. Individuals in turn are too engrossed with their own secrets to take notice of the world around them or to forge meaningful relations with others, within and/or outside the familial domain. Khoo’s early films create analogies to trace the disparity between the visionary endeavors articulated from the top and the reality of daily doldrums that anchor the everyday people firmly to the ground. By giving privy to the “lived” reality of HDB-dwellers who experience endemic urban alienation, *12 Storeys* presents an alternative, albeit gloomy, way of seeing the nation-state: It is a sunny tropical isle high on economic achievements but low on other endeavors, especially human(istic) ones. The alterity of Khoo’s early films bears the mark of an honest and bold filmmaker.

Continued: Notes

Notes

[1] We would like to thank Gina Marchetti and Julia Lesage for their comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. In this paper, we generally use the Chinese nomination order for a person's name (that is, surname first), the exception being Western names, or people who have a Western given name; in which case, the second word in the nomination sequence would be the surname of that person—for example, Stan Barrett and Eric Khoo.

[2] Our category, "Khoo's early films," refers to the short and feature films which Khoo produced and directed between 1990 and 1997, as distinct from Khoo's more recent works in that his involvement in them is that of co-producer only. Our particular study of Khoo's early films excludes *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990) and *August* (1991) because we had no access to these shorts at the time of writing this paper. Space constraints also impede a similar close reading of Khoo's more recent films, but references to them will be made where appropriate.

[3] Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 119.

[4] All Chinese film titles are given in pinyin. Local films invariably have an English title, though not all have a Chinese one. Those which have a Chinese title are either wholly in Mandarin, or predominantly in Mandarin with a dash of other local languages, including Chinese dialects. Those without tend to be in English, smattered with Singlish and local Chinese dialects. Here Mandarin may be used, but only occasionally.

[5] PAP is the acronym for the People's Action Party which came to power in 1959 and has since ruled Singapore continuously.

[6] Kuo Pao Kun, "Re-Positioning the Arts," *The Arts Magazine* (November/December 1999), p. 22.

[7] Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, p. 1.

[8] Singlish is a colloquial term for the highly localized version of English, or English with a strong local flavor. Singlish is thus like English, except it comes smattered with words, phrases and

expressions borrowed from Malay, Tamil, Mandarin and other Chinese languages such as Cantonese and Hokkein.

[9] Author unknown, "Poultry in Motion," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (November 16, 2000), p. L5. The *Straits Times* is Singapore's longest running English daily.

[10] Produced and directed by Indian nationals, K. R. S. Chisty and B. S. Rajhans, respectively, the first local film, *Laila Majnun* was made in 1933. It had "Bangsawan [Malay opera] actors, musicians and set designers and, like Bangsawan, was in the Malay language," and told the legend of titular namesakes, otherwise known as the Romeo and Juliet of the Persian-Islamic world. See William Van Der Heide, *Malaysia Cinema, Asian Film* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), pp. 124-26. In addition, between 1938-1942, the Shaw Organisation made eight Malay films, under the banner of Shaw Brothers. They were all directed by Miss Yen and Wan Hai Ling, believed to have been from Shanghai. For a list of these films, see Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, p. 224.

[11] Ibid., pp. 1-31 and Van Der Heide, *Malaysia Cinema, Asian Film*, pp. 123-49. Shaw Runme founded the Shaw Organisation in 1924. In 1935, the Associated Theatres Limited was established; it was renamed Cathay Organisation in 1959.

[12] In 1965, Singapore became an independent nation after its separation from the Federation of Malaysia.

[13] In 1960, Cathay-Keris produced Singapore's first Mandarin film, *Lion City* (in Chinese: *Yi Sui*; dir. Thung Pak Chee). It would appear that this is also Cathay-Keris' only Mandarin movie.

[14] Cf., Chan Heng Chee, "Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has All the Politics Gone?" in Seah Chee Meow, ed., *Trends in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), pp. 51-68. Cf., Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[15] See Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, pp. 186-87.

[16] Ibid., pp. 29-30. Cf., John Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (London: Christopher Helm, 1990), p. 98.

[17] Stan Barrett is American, while Arthur Smith who replaces Barrett as the director is British. Unless otherwise stated, all directors named in this paper are of Singapore origin.

[18] For a discussion of this film, see Udhe and Uhde, *Latent Images*, pp. 109-10.

[19] Cf., David Birch, “Film and Cinema in Singapore: Cultural Policy as Control,” in Albert Moran, ed., *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 185-211. See also Udhe and Uhde, *Latent Images*, pp. 59-80.

[20] This figure comprises the 35 features listed on Singapore Film Commission (SFC)’s website: “List of Singapore Films (1991-2002)” <http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic_list.shtm> (April 10, 2003). It also includes two films not on the SFC’s list, namely, Cathay/Film Workshop’s *A Chinese Ghost Story—The Animation* (in Mandarin: *Xiao Qian*; dir. Tsui Hark, 1997), and *15—The Movie* (in Mandarin: *Shi Wu*; dir. Royston Tan, 2003). Of the 35 films on the SFC’s list, four have yet to see commercial release in Singapore.

[21] Abdul Nizam is a Malay-Singaporean.

[22] Given that a primary focus of this paper is on Eric Khoo the filmmaker, we will highlight films which are made in association with Khoo’s production company, Zhao Wei Films. *Stories About Love* is a Zhao Wei-Cyberflics co-production. It features a portmanteau of three stories, each helmed by a different director.

[23] The only exception to the three categories would be *Miss Wonton* (Dream Chamber Films, 2001). Directed by Meng Ong, a Singaporean, this film is produced and financed by American investors. See Marie K. Lee, “Sundance Interview of Meng Ong the Director and Amy Ting the Star of *Miss Wonton*” <http://www.naatanet.org/forumarchive/meng_ong.html> (April 16, 2003). See also “List of Singapore Films (1991-2002)” <http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic_list.shtm>.

[24] Produced by MegaMedia (Singapore), *Song of the Stork* is the first, and so far only, Singapore-Vietnam collaboration in film. Jonathan Foo is Singaporean, while Nguyen Phan Quang Binh is Vietnamese. See “*Song of the Stork*” <http://www.megamedia.com.sg/mstork.html> (April 20, 2003).

[25] See, for example, “*15*” <http://www.zhaowei.com/15> (April 18, 2003). See also “In Tune with Disaffection,” “Life!” in *Straits Times* (October 12, 2002), p. L3.

[26] Gordan Chan is a Hong Kong director.

[27] No relation to Eric Khoo.

[28] Colin Goh, in an interview with Karl Ho, “Look Who’s Talking?” “Life!” in *Straits Times* (April 17, 2002), p. L1. See also Tan Tarn

How “Coming, talkingcock.com movie,” *Straits Times* (August 30, 2001) <http://it.asia1.com.sg/newsarchive/08/news016_20010830.html> (April 17, 2003). *Talkingcock—The Movie* is based on the satirical website on Singapore society, founded by Colin Goh in 2000. For this website, check <http://www.talkingcock.com/>. “Talking cock” is local parlance for activities relating to idle chatting, inluding satirical speech.

[29] Tsui Hark (a.k.a., Xu Ke) is one of Hong Kong’s most established directors.

[30] The second is a coproduction with Film Workshop (Hong Kong), while the other two are wholly local ventures.

[31] Cited, Udhe and Uhde, *Latent Images,* p. 113.

[32] Cathay Organisation has been a publicly listed company on the Singapore Stock Exchange since 1999. Shaw Organisation, on the other hand, remains in the hands of the Shaw family.

[33] GV, or Golden Village, is a joint venture company between Australia’s Village Roadshow Limited and Raymond Chow’s Golden Harvest Group of Hong Kong See “GV Cinema” <http://www.gv.com.sg/> (April 16, 2003).

[34] According to Kelvin Tong, Singapore had a total of 160 screens in 1998. Of them, GV had 51, while Shaw and Cathay had 29 and 12, respectively. The other three major film exhibitors were Eng Wah (public listed in 1994) with 18 screens, and Studio Cinemas and Overseas Movie, with 13 screens each. Finally there were six relatively small-scaled exhibitors, with a screening capacity that ranged from one to seven. See Kelvin Tong, “Cinema Guide,” “Life!” in *Straits Times* (April 18, 1998), p. L1. The Singapore Department of Statistics gives a lower figure: 133, 144, 134 and 131 screens in the respective year of 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001. Cited; “Number of Cinema Screens and Seating Capacity in Singapore (1998-2002) <http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic_screen&seat.shtm> (April 16, 2003).

[35] Singapore has an average cinema attendance of 17.5 million per year (1991-2001), about four times the size of its population. See “Cinema Attendance in Singapore” <http://www.sfc.org.sg/statistics/statistic.shtm> (April 12, 2003). Cf., Birch, “Film and Cinema in Singapore,” p. 209n2.

[36] Neo and Khoo have also teamed up in *Drive*, a six-part TV series which MediaCorp commissioned to Zhao Wei Films to produce in 1998.

[37] In terms of top-grossing movies of all time in Singapore, this

film is third to the two Hollywood blockbusters, *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1998) and *The Lost World* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1997).

[38] *Money No Enough* grosses S$5.8 million, while *That One No Enough*, *Liang Po Po—The Movie* and *I Not Supid* chalk up S$1.02 million, S$3.03 million and S$3.8 million, respectively, from local sales. After *Money No Enough*, Neo plays a Singapore lawyer in the local-Hong Kong coproduction of *The Mirror* (*Guai Tan Zhi Mo Jing*; dir. Raymond Wong, 1999). A box-office bomb, this film is a portmanteau of the four horror stories variously set in Ming China, Shanghai in the 1920s, modern-day Singapore and contemporary Hong Kong. The stories are linked by an antique chest of drawers, with the eponymous looking glass as its feature, and revolved around the theme of its capacity to exert a strange power over the various owners of the antique-piece, compelling them to behave oddly, with tragic and deadly consequences. Neo appears in the third story. Under the spell of mirror, he would do anything to win a case for a rapist and murderer. Made by Mandarin Films (in Chinese: Dongfang Dianying; Hong Kong) at the cost of S$2 million, *The Mirror* raked in only S$160,000 at the local box-office.

The highly versatile Raymond Wong Bak Ming who directs the film was a co-founder of the now defunct Cinema City (Hong Kong) with Mak Kar and Dean Shek Tien, in 1980. When this studio closed in 1991, he established Mandarin Films. In 1993, Mandarin Films started to operate in Singapore, partly because of the lucrative tax-break which the Singapore government offered to film joint-ventures, and partly due to the politico-economic uncertainty in Hong Kong in the run-up to the imminent handover of the territory to China in 1997. It reportedly invested a cumulative total of some S$60 million in Singapore for the purpose of making films in the nation-state.

Yet these films distinctly featured outlooks and sensibilities more attuned to the Hong Kong way of life, even though some were shot in Singapore. This is perhaps not surprising since the films were predominantly based on screenplays written by Hong Kong scripwriters, and featured Hong Kong directors and stars. That is to say, the input of local talents in Mandarin Film productions with a Singapore label was minimal, if any at all. Cf., Birch, "Film and Cinema in Singapore," p. 187, and Darryl Pestilence, "Studio: Cinema City" <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/durer/661/cinemacity.htm> (May 24, 2003).

[39] Insofar as the method for sharing the revenue generated from the ticket sales is concerned, complex formulae exist; but generally speaking, both the exhibitor and distributor would make the first claim, which amounts to about 50 and 25 percent, respectively, of the gross take, with entertainment tax treated as separate. Although the producer gets to keep the remainder, or a share thereof, in the case of co-production, s/he is responsible for the cost of production.

To turn a profit then, a film needs to earn at least four times over and above the production cost. Cf., Jamie Ee, "Staying Alive: [Singapore's] Movie Business" <http://www.asia1.com.sg/bizcentre/reading/r980815a.html> (April 12, 2003).

[40] Kuo Pao Kun, *Art vs Art: Conflict and Convergence* (Singapore: The Substation.1995), p. 145; cited, Lily Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas," *Geoforum* 31 (2000), p. 420.

[41] See Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, pp. 35-57, 52-53, 81-105. The SIFF and the Substation are two major venues for showcasing local shorts (both video and DV). Though our study here does not include shorts, it is worth mentioning that some feature-length films actually begin their existence as shorts—for example, *Talkingcock—The Movie* (2002) and *15—The Movie* (2003). See also "Singapore Film Society" <http://www.sfs.org.sg/> (April 19, 2003), "About Us" <http://www.filmfest.org.sg/about.shtml> (April 16, 2003) and "The Substation: Home for the Arts" <http://www.substation.org/> (April 16, 2003). Cf., Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore," pp. 420-21.

[42]See Kelvin Tong, "Singapore: The Cannes of the East?" "Life!" in *Straits Times* (28 April 1998), p. L3. The money came from MITA (Ministry of Information and the Arts), and two statutory boards, STB (Singapore Tourism Board) and EDB (Economic Development Board).

[43] For a listing of SFC's activities, see "About Us" <http://www.sfc.org.sg/abtus/abtus.shtm> (April 10, 2002). Cf., Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, pp. 12, 49, 71, 98-99, 107, 124-25, 145, 170, 205-08.

[44] Distinguished filmmakers for thes series have included director Peter Weir (e.g. *The Truman Show*, 1998), composer Michael Nyman (e.g. *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, dir. Peter Greenaway; 1989) and cinematographer Peter Pau (e.g. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Tiger;* in Mandarin: *Wo Hu Cang Long*, dir. Lee Ang; 2000). Lee Ang, A Taiwanese filmmaker, also goes by the name of Ang Lee.

[45] "Corporate Profile" <http://raintree.mediacorpstudios.com/about_us/abt_us.htm> (April 10, 2003).

[46] See "SFC: News Release" (February 1, 2002) <http://www.sfc.org.sg/pressrelease/press_telemovies.shtm> (April 12, 2003).

[47] Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore," pp. 415-16.

[48] George Yeo Yong Boon, "An International Market for the Arts," *Speeches: A Bi-monthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches*, 17 (1993), p. 66; cited, Kong, "Cultural Policy in Singapore," p. 415. George Yeo is the then Minister of MITA; he relinquishes that portfolio to become the Minister Trade and Industry, around mid-1999.

[49] George Yeo Yong Boon, "Promoting the Arts," *Speeches: A Bi-monthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 16 (1992), 114; cited, ibid.

[50] George Yeo Yong Boon, "Singapore Arts Centre: Taking Shape," *Speeches: A Bi-monthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches* 18.4, (1994), pp. 36; cited, ibid.

[51] NAC and NHB were established in 1991 and 1993, respectively.

[52] The precursor to this report is the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts Report (1989), often regarded as a watershed document for the development of culture and the arts in the nation-state because it is the first to advocate, since independence, the building of associated infrastructure as both a state concern and affair.

[53] "Executive Summary," *Renaissance City Report* (2000) <http://www.mita.gov.sg/renaissance.htm> (April 14, 2003).

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., emphasis ours.

[56] "Chapter 7," *Renaissance City Report* (2000) <http://www.mita.gov.sg/renaissance/C7.htm> (April 14, 2003). Emphasis ours.

[57] "Executive Summary," *Renaissance City Report* (2000) <http://www.mita.gov.sg/renaissance.htm>.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Eric Khoo (2001); Cited, "Bite Into It [Singapore film-maker Eric Khoo (*One Leg Kicking*) on never being able to please the critics]," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (December 7, 2001), p. L1.

[60] Alexandra A. Seno & Santha Oorjitham, "Gaining Cultural Capital," in *Asiaweek.com* <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/97/0912/feat2.html> (April 18, 2003).

[61] Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), p. 147.

[62] This corpus consists of five shorts and two features. As mentioned before, our study does not include Khoo's first two shorts, *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990) and *August* (1991).

[63] "*Pain*" <http://www.zhaowei.com/pain.htm> (April 18, 2003).

[64] Eric Khoo in an interview; cited, Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, p. 121. Cf., Tan Shzr Ee, "Too Close for for Comfort," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (September 17, 2002), p. L1.

[65] Nazir Husain is a Malay-Singaporean.

[66] Hokkein which originates from the Fujian Province, south China is, generally speaking, the language of illiterate elderly people, school dropouts and blue-collar workers. Though still a widely spoken local Chinese dialect, it is also a "disowned" language of the state.

[67] In *12 Storeys*, Bunny's pimp, Mike Kor (played by Lim Kay Tong) from *Mee Pok Man*, makes a "cameo" appearance at the neighborhood coffee shop of the former film. While there, he has a brief conversation with an anonymous lout. During this conversation, viewers learn that he has knowledge of Bunny's death, and that he blames the mee pok man for it. The two films thus find an interface in this way.

[68] Derek Elly, "*12 Storeys*," *Variety* (June 9-15, 1997), p. 71.

[69] Michael Fay, the American youth at the center of the controversial vandalism trial (1994), appears only in the speech of these taxi-drivers. For a background of this trial, see, for example, Alejandro Reyes, "Rough Justice: A Caning in Singapore Stirs Up a Fierce Debate About Crime and Punishment," *Asiaweek* (May 25, 1994) <http://www.corpun.com/awfay9405.htm> (April 26, 2003).

[70] They speak in Teochew, a language which originates from the Chaozhou County of the Fujian Province, south China. In Singapore, Teochew is not as widely spoken as Hokkein is, but like the latter, is a "disowned" language of the state.

[71] This composition is a variation to the ghostly father scene in *Mee Pok Man*.

[72] Lee Kuan Yew, *Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew: The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Times Publishing, 1998), p.130. Cf, Chua Beng Huat,

Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 124-46.

[73] Cherian George, "Not All Can Be Under One Roof," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (1997, June 27), p. L4.

[74] *The Committee on Performing Arts* (November, 1988), p. 58; cited, Birch, "Film and Cinema in Singapore," p. 185. Emphasis ours.

[75] Goh Chok Tong, *The Primer Minister National Day Rally Speech* (1999) <http://app.internet.gov.sg/data/sprinter/pr/archives/1999082202.htm> (July 2, 2002).

[76] Ibid.

[77] Goh Chok Tong, *Address by Singapore Prime Minister at the Dinner Hosted by Economic Minister Dr Hans Wijers on Thursday, October 10, 1996 in the Netherlands* <http://app10.internet.gov.sg/data/sprinter/pr/1996101102.htm> (April 27, 2003).

[78] Goh Chok Tong, *Singapore Dream and Singaporeans' Dream: Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on Friday, December 20, 1996, at NTU's Main Lecture Theatre at 7.30 pm* <http://app10.internet.gov.sg/data/sprinter/pr/1996122001.htm> (April 26, 2003).

[79] Ibid. Also Cf., "Attracting Foreign Talent vs Looking after Singaporeans," in *Singapore 21: Together, We Make The Difference* (1997) <http://www.singapore21.org.sg/S21report_txtonly.doc> (April 26, 2003).

[80] Cf., Michael Lee, "Dead Man Gazing: Posthumous Voyeurism in *12 Storeys*, or 'Splacing' Singapore's Official and Unofficial Discourse," *Asian Cinema* (Fall/Winter 2000), pp. 114-18.

[81] Chua Beng Huat, "Viewpoint: Wau Lau! A 'Chim' Take on Hokkein," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (June 21, 1998), p. L5.

[82] This, the PAP government has been reluctant to admit openly. But in recent years, radio and TV programs in Chinese dialects have resurfaced periodically on the various channels of the government-controlled media. This occurred, for example, in the run-up to the country's General Election 2001. During this period, the media would broadcast speeches which PAP electoral candidates gave at public rallies, including those made in Chinese dialects.

If a policy change as such was part and parcel of the ruling PAP's election gimmickry to win votes from some quarters of the population, it was also reflective of that party's anxiety over its dwindling support from the "non-elite" section of the electorate. Earlier this year (2003), Chinese dialects made yet another return to the broadcast media: during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic, the PAP government was compelled to use and rely on dialects for creating SARS awareness, especially among the elderly and less-educated Chinese-Singaporeans. Media celebrities were roped in for the task; among the SARS education enlistees were Kim Ng, Bryan Wong and Xiang Yun.

[83] This is found in the inside page of the back cover for exercise books available for purchase by students of Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Primary School in Bishan HDB Estate, Singapore.

[84] Eric Khoo, in an interview; cited, Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, p. 191.

[85] See Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress. *Social Semiotics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 26-27, 121-128. Cf., John Clammer, "Deconstructing Values: The Establishment of a National Ideology and Its Implications for Singapore's Political Future," in Garry Rodan, ed., *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), pp. 34-51, and Lim Shan-Loong Mark, "Shared Values & Their Role in Singapore's Evolving Ideological Framework" (26th March 1999) <http://members.tripod.com/~marklsl/Writings/values.htm> (April 27, 2003).

[86] "Singapore Infomap for Kids: The National Website for Kids" <http://www.sg/kids/val.htm> (April 20, 2003).

[87] "Ministry of Education: The National Symbols" <http://vs.moe.edu.sg/national_symbol.htm> (April 20, 2003).

[88] "Expat Singapore" <http://www.expatsingapore.com/general/pledge.shtml> (April 20, 2003).

[89] Eric Khoo, in an interview (1999); cited; Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, p. 122. "OB markers" is a local euphemism for politically sensitive issues which discussion in any public form or forum is off-limit to Singaporeans in general, with "OB" standing for "Out of Bound." Of these issues, race and religion are top, or near the top, of the "list." The "list" does not exist as a formal document; so OB markers are somewhat both opaque and translucent. People who thread upon them, unknowingly or inadvertently, risk official repercussion since these markers, though informal, are presumed to be the tacit knowledge of all Singaporeans.

[90] The exhibition of R(A) films is not permitted in cinema-houses located in all HDB estates.

[91] Sandi Tan, "A Boon for Film-maker," "Life!" in *Straits Times* (May 8, 1995), p. L2.

[92] Cf., James Gomez, *Self-censorship: Singapore's Shame* (Singapore: Think Centre, 2000), pp. 55-66.

[93] Cf., Tan See Kam, "Ban(g)! Ban(g)! *Dangerous Encounter— 1st Kind*: Writing with Censorship," *Asian Cinema* (Spring 1996), pp. 83-108.

[94] Michael Levine, *Writing Through Repression: Literature, Censorship and Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p.26.

[95] Ibid., pp. 2-3, 25-30, 34-45, 51-52.

[96] Tan See Kam, Michael Lee Hong Hwee and Annette Aw, "Culture of Reticence: Reading Secrets, Family, and Communication in *12 Stories*," A refereed paper presented at the *International Communication Association Conference 2002* (Popular Communication Division) (Korea: ICA, 2002).

[97] Lee, "Dead Man Gazing," pp. 107-24.

[98] Ibid., p. 110.

[99] In Singapore, people who engage in alternative lifestyles such as homosexual practices are liable to be prosecuted. Alternative lifestyles as such are deemed as criminal acts. In the context of local filmmaking, they would fall within the OB marker domain, especially if they are portrayed in the positive light. Thus *Bugis Street* (in Mandarin: *Yao Jie Huang Hou*; dir. Yon Fan, 1995) is "acceptable" perhaps because it features the lives of transvestite-prostitutes in tragic terms. There is also the matter that its Mandarin title when translated into English means "The Queen of Demon Street." (Yon Fan, the director of this local R(A) rated film, is based in Hong Kong.)

At the time of *12 Storeys*, sympathetic representation of alternative styles remain an untested ground, though in more recent years, local feature films with queer characters have appeared—most famous is Liang Po Po, a granny played by Jack Neo in drag. Liang Po Po, however, is stripped off all sexuality: she is a desexualized comic figure. Cf., the various shorts directed by Royston Tan—for example, *15*(2002), *48 on AIDS* (2002), *Hock Hiap Leong* (2001), *Mother* (2001), *Sons* (2000), *Senses* (1999), *Kisses* (1998) and *Adam.Eve.Steve* (1997). These shorts do not have an explicit alternative agenda, sexuality-wise speaking, but they variously feature a campy aesthetics that verges on queer sensitivity and sensibility.

[100] Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese* (London: Arrow, 1998), p. 193.

[101] Ibid., p. 196.

[102] Author unknown, *Chinatown: An Album of a Singapore Community* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1983), p. 156.

[103] Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, p. 196.

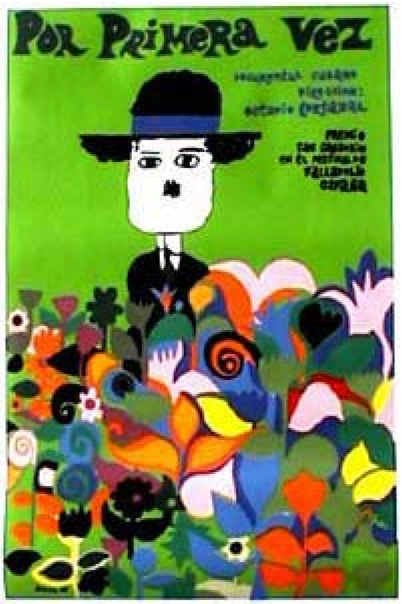
[104] Ann Wee, “The Way We Were,” in *The Ties That Bind: In Search of the Modern Singapore Family* (Singapore: Aware, 1996), p. 25. Cf., Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949* (London: Polity Press, 1997).

To top Print version JC 46 *Jump Cut* home

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Letter from Cuba

by Michael Chanan



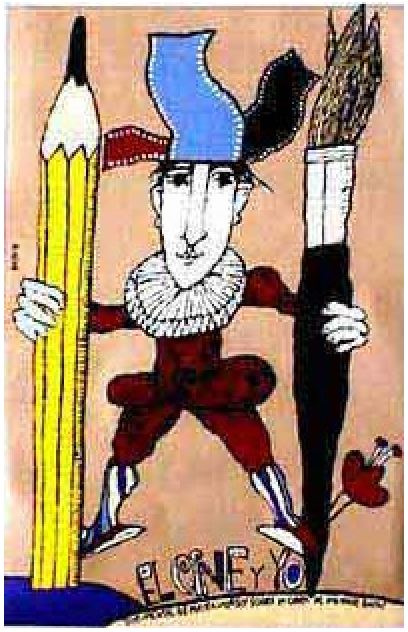
San Antonio de los Baños, 18 January 2003

Dear friends,

The International Film School in Cuba has a new director, Julio García Espinosa, filmmaker and author back in 1969 of "For an Imperfect Cinema." At Julio's invitation, I have arrived here in January 2003 to give a couple of talks on film music, and hopefully to set up one or two collaborative projects. It's the time of year when the weather is just a little chilly, and the first year students are shooting their first 3-minute exercises.

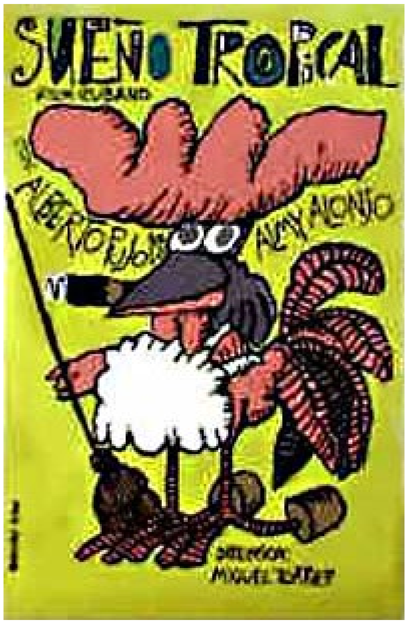
The students are from all over the continent as well as a few who come from Europe. Behind their quiet intense activity, and among the teaching staff – who are also drawn from several Latin American countries as well as Cuba itself – there's a certain expectation of change. In recent years the School has built up a reputation for technical excellence while losing something of its original inspiration, which came from the politically committed cinema of the movement known as *el nuevo cine latinoamericano*. Perhaps this is not surprising since the movement itself lost its impulse and identity sometime ago, which in turn was the inevitable result of larger changes in the world in which the movement tried to make its way.

Perhaps also the school was only responding to the altered aspirations of its students. They are a new generation who belong to a continent emerging from a dark period of military dictatorships. Those repressive regimes were provoked (with Washington's proactive support) by what might have seemed to the students' generation as a hopeless if not excessive



revolutionary zeal – although Cuba itself has always retained a great deal of sympathy across the continent. But the world has changed again, for both better and worse.

These large scale changes register differently in different places. As always, l find that a visit to Cuba puts me in touch with the rest of Latin America simply because of the escape from the media's occidental bias back home. (As you know, "back home" for me is England; if it were the United States, one would have to speak of a different kind of bias, that of rampant isolationism.) So merely turning on the television news in Cuba (which by the way includes material supplied by CNN) is to discover that not only Brazil but also Ecuador has a new leftist president. Or in Venezuela, the "historical oligarchy" which is trying to hold the Chavez government to ransom is being solidly repudiated by huge popular mobilizations, and indeed it seems that a process of radicalization is underway there. In short, as an Argentinean student put it in a conversation late one evening: in global terms, with the threat of war against Iraq and the unresolved situation in the Middle East, we are living through very dark times, but Latin America, he thinks, is probably the sanest part of the world—even if his own country is living a nightmare of capitalist collapse.



At all events, Julio's appointment represents a powerful reconnection with the best and least dogmatic aspects of the earlier period, and among the teaching staff there is a feeling that the school is returning to its rightful heritage.

My activities are not limited to the film school. Invited by the journal *Revolution y cultura* to participate in a round table discussion on Cuban cinema with a group of local film critics – including the excellent Rufo Caballero, I discover critics express a good deal of disquiet about the state of affairs at the Cuban Film Institute, ICAIC. ICAIC failed to present any new films at last month's Havana Film Festival, although there are currently four films in postproduction and another three slated for production this year.

The problem was not originally of ICAIC's making but stems from the economic collapse at the beginning of the 90s. Financial need forced ICAIC to enter the market for co-productions with foreign partners that

had a predilection for treating Cuba as an exotic background for genre pieces. (One of the only directors able to ride this situation was the sadly missed Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.) But the media critics' feeling is that ICAIC has not yet learned to adapt in such a way as to support independent low budget domestic production. (Low budget is of course an entirely relative term, since even ICAIC's most costly films are very low budget compared to Hollywood.) Three years ago, a documentary by a student graduating from the audio-visual department of the ISA (Instituto Superior del Arte) – Cuba's other film school—portrayed the crisis at ICAIC in no uncertain terms.

Coincidentally (or rather, in one of those coincidences which, as Adorno would say, is not entirely a coincidence) ICAIC‘s president, Alfredo Guevara, resigned shortly afterwards to concentrate on running the international film festival, and his successor, Omar González, provided hope of a fresh start. Indeed ICAIC has made efforts to bring some of the graduates of the ISA under their wing, but so far without success. This is partly, l gather, because ISA filmmakers' preoccupations do not coincide closely enough with ICAIC's ideas of a national cinema capable of international projection. Perhaps this would not be such a problem if ICAIC, which has control of the country's film distribution, would at least open up the cinemas to these new wave films – or rather, the videotheques, because these pieces are made on video not film. The videotheques were introduced by García Espinosa in the 1980s when he was in charge of ICAIC, but now they mainly serve to allow the exhibition of films which would be too expensive for ICAIC to acquire on 35mm. (Interestingly, in the convergence between film and video, Humberto Solás recently shot ICAIC's first digital feature, *Miel para Ochún*, and is now planning a second.)

The result is a curiously paradoxical situation. A series of factors have conspired to produce a growth in independent video production. These include the economic reforms introduced during the 90s (involving a degree of liberalisation) and the arrival of new video formats, together with the need for new personnel for television and commercials which is fed by the ISA. This situation, incidentally, confirms that despite the U.S. blockade, Cuba is no way a pre-postmodern country, let us call it, any more than anywhere else in Latin America.

Other factors include the tradition of radicalism in the plastic arts, which in the late 1980s got the artists into trouble with the Communist old guard, and the development of an atmosphere in intellectual and artistic life in general which has seen the end of the old hard-liners' influence which held back the expression of political difference. A new trope has entered the vocabulary which distinguishes between political critique (legitimate) and ideological opposition (unacceptable). In other words, Cuban socialism has opened up to renegotiating political life while remaining firmly dedicated to socialist principles. What this means. in terms of film and video production, is that many criticize ICAIC for apparently wanting to stick with the epic past while the new generation's preoccupations lie in quite different directions.

For some young Cubans the problem lies even deeper. I was also invited to give a talk at the ISA. There, one of the most interesting questions I am asked is about discourse. The stance of the question seems very postmodernist, namely, "Why should the viewer trust the discourse of the documentary?" My answer is probably too long and expansive; at the end the questioner responds by effectively repeating the question in another key. "That's all very well," he says, "but why should I believe your discourse?" There is a complex subtext here, but the long and the short of it is this: The question represents the situation of the young Cuban intelligentsia. They are unable any longer to accept the old discourse of the Revolution, but perhaps unable also to accept that of the outside world which is derived from quite different kinds of experience.

Meanwhile, everyone tells me that if there is one new piece of work I should see it is *Video de familia--Family Video* by Humberto Padrón, made with ICAIC's assistance as a graduation piece for the ISA.

(To give ICAIC its due, this work at least received a commercial screening.) The video's scenario is one of those simple but inimitable ideas which provoke the response, "Why didn't someone think of that before?" A family has gathered together to make a video to send to the eldest son who has quit Cuba for the United States—father, mother, grandmother, and the absentee's two siblings. The sister lets slip that her absent brother is gay, provoking the horrified repudiation of the father's old-style communist homophobia.

The power of the piece lies largely in its superb acting, including by some veteran actors (the mother is played by Veronica Lynn). And it also gains power from the fact that half the time the characters address themselves directly to camera in the appropriate manner of the home video, thereby drawing the viewer into the family's private space in a peculiar way not normally open to fiction. It's a very clever work indeed, which l am tempted to read in the kind of Lacanian terms favoured by Slavoj Zizek. That is, the response of the father, who of course represents the big Other, is to declare his absent son persona non grata in the family home, in other words, to banish him from the symbolic order. It's a somewhat redundant gesture, however, since the absent son has done that already by removing himself to the United States. In sum, the theme is not new in Cuban cinema, but its expression here is fresh, funny, and moving.

I have set myself up for some kind of conclusion to this missive, so here goes. As for the big Other who rules the country, and who stands as guarantor of its symbolic order, I can only say that it would be a mistake to suppose that without him the current order of Cuban society will necessarily collapse. A few years ago, the political scientist and editor of Cuba's most interesting intellectual journal, *Temas*, Rafael Hernandéz, remarked that to wake up in Cuba in 1991 was to wake up to a permanent nightmare. On my last visit here two years ago I already felt that the Cubans had woken from this nightmare to discover that they were still there, and as a result, they had recovered their balance and joie de vivre.

Another friend suggests that behind the outward tranquility of Cuba in January 2003, the peaceful social orderliness of the country, the population is gripped by an inner anxiety. While I cannot doubt his testimony, I also find too much political intelligence, too much of people's concern to discover new ways of adapting to changing conditions, to suppose that Cuba is simply living the last days of a tired socialism, and that a collapse back into the chaos of capitalism is a foregone conclusion. So as I leave Cuba at the end of my visit, I can only sign off,

Yours in hope,

Michael

P.S. A new edition of Michael Chanan's history of Cuban cinema is on its way.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

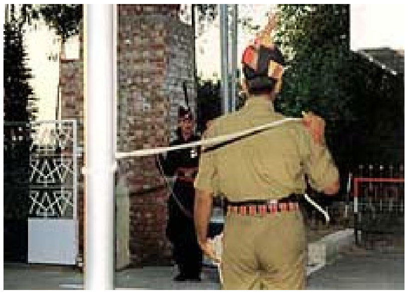
Why the personal is still political—some lessons from contemporary Indian documentary

by Jyotsna Kapur

“Poetry, I give you a break today
In the regime of hunger, the earth belongs to prose
The full moon burns like a loaf of bread.”
—Sukanto Bhattacharya[1]

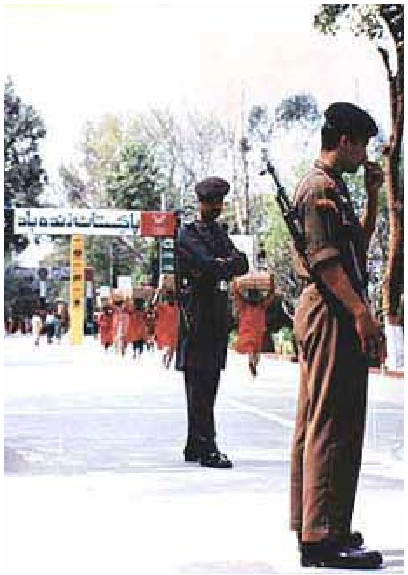
“Someday perhaps, the poem,
Murdered, but still bleeding on every page
Will be revealed to you.
Someday perhaps, the banner
Of that song bowed low in waiting
Will be raised to its great height by a tornado.”
—Faiz Ahmed Faiz[2]

A Season Outside: Kanwar’s camera captures fragments in time showing the present to be an unstable moment, its peace only momentary. These scenes from the opening sequence, which is shot on the Wagah border, between India and Pakistan evoke the dizzying sense of encountering one’s violent historical past. Each image then stands out rich and vibrant, as if being seen for the first time.



The militaristic ritual takes on the character of a ritual dance …

Indian socialist poets, like elsewhere, have nurtured radical movements with songs and poems that express the desires and hopes of social transformation. Their work flames protest against unbearable conditions and builds courage by awakening, in the words of Faiz, “desire even in the absence of hope.”[3] Like any radical theory or artwork, such poetry hopes for its own demise once its work is done. Then perhaps another kind of poetry, one not so urgent, even of the bourgeois kind, can be written. Indian Marxist poets articulate their opposition to bourgeois aesthetics by presenting the dilemma of the revolutionary poet. How can bourgeois poetry’ main themes—personal experience, particularly admiration of nature and love for the beloved—be written about? Because of material conditions, such poetry mocks the lives and experiences of the marginalized and laboring majority. Against bourgeois insistence on aesthetics as the defining feature and function of art, revolutionary poetry asserts its political use value to the movement(not to be understood narrowly as something quantifiable), and it is the struggle for change that gives birth to that poetry and is also the reason for its existence.


…choreographed to the minutest detail…

While poets can both write poetry and disclaim its bourgeois variants, so strong has been this thinking in the Indian left that politically committed documentary cinema has tended to steer away from a lyric voice that might be construed as either personal or poetic. Recently, however, documentary filmmakers have turned their attention to subjects imagined as “personal” prior to the women’s movement—i.e., sexuality and the domestic sphere. These filmmakers also make an epistemological claim for the subjective and poetic as the basis for knowing. In this paper, I discuss how this turn in the arts redefines the relation between the personal and political, between poetry and politics in Indian documentary. My case studies are two recent films, *A Season Outside* (Amar Kanwar, 1998) and *Kumar Talkies* (Pankaj Rishi Kumar, 1999). As I contextualize these films in relation to the Indian political left in general, and documentary film in particular, I want to foreground how this turn to the personal is quite different from the chronologically parallel, Western, post-structuralist retreat from the political.

...that is repeated every evening...

In recent years, as any international film festival will demonstrate, documentary films have come to be predominantly structured around the first-person narrative. This aesthetic approach can be seen as a shift towards a more politically engaged public sphere, as Julia Lesage had argued in relation to feminist documentaries that use the personal as a standpoint from which the world can be known and changed. But in many other documentaries from the eighties and the nineties, the autobiographical turn may signal that the personal in fact, now serves the filmmaker as a device to withdraw from the political.[4] This is especially marked when the genre attempts to deconstruct documentary’s claim to being a springboard for action and substitutes instead the trope of the bourgeois white male filmmaker as a

… as the ever encroaching

camera shows a state of mind stunned by the re-enactment of the violent splitting of families and lives.

Kanwar's camera looks repeatedly at the lines and colors that mark territory. Here goods are exchanged over the border…

...as workers pass their loads across the line.

lost and unwitting figure.

A prime example of this tendency, which Paul Arthur aptly categorizes as the "aesthetics of failure" occurs in the narrative structure of Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1987).[5] The film centers on McElwee's failure to complete a historical film on General Sherman's march. His journey shows him sidetracked into numerous failed encounters with women on the way. We could possible read the film as "political" if we find that McElwee's comparison of his own bumbling efforts with Sherman's aggressive pursuit of goals serves as an historical record of the fall of white Southern middle-class masculinity. However, McElwee successfully diffuses any tension around the male filmmaker's loss of power through self-deprecation, and thus the film as a whole belies documentary's claim that the world can be known and changed. Underlying McElwee's self-mocking gestures is another political assumption: Since the filmmaker is incapable of knowing himself, much less the world, any search for truth through documentary filmmaking is bound to fail.

The documentarist's personal voice, in this case, serves to present a self-indulgent and relativist view upon which no political strategy of change can be based. Countering such individualist tendencies in documentary media making, in which the film's personal focus diffuses political impact or analysis, is another kind of personal documentary work, one strongly rooted in what Bill Nichols calls the "politics of location."[6] Here the filmmaker literally uses his/her own body, as did the feminist filmmakers earlier, and connects it to a broader truth about society. For example, Marlon Riggs, at the time HIV positive, brought his own condition into a more general representation of the struggles, joys and solidarity of gay black men in *Tongues Untied* (1991).

Indian documentary traditions

Both of the above strategies in personal documentary filmmaking explore an identity based on the historical construction of one's body, using the self, especially the social/material self, as the primary foundation from which one can know and understand the world. Where does this leave filmmakers whose personal location may

Fences, windows, lines that divide and demarcate territory, whether the home or nation are a repeated pattern in this film. Here we see an Indian soldier looking across the border at Pakistan. This shot is rhymed later in the film where we see a woman look out of her window at a militaristic parade, as the voice over speaks of violence within the film maker's home.

The film combines direct cinema with analysis, the experience of trauma with detached contemplation through the juxtaposition of voice-over and image. Here, over the shot of a street play by Buddhist monks, which at first sight appears to be a real attack by the police, Kanwar begins to narrate an imaginary conversation with a monk.

differ from their subjects in terms of class, gender or race? This question particularly confronts Indian documentary filmmakers. Because media making usually implies middle-class knowledge and skill, progressive Indian documentary filmmakers, like their Western counterparts, as Chuck Kleinhans has indicated, often have a different class position than the subjects in their films.[7]

Since one of documentary's primary impulses has been to contribute to political struggles, documentary filmmakers are invariably called upon to identify with the Other. Only a severely cynical view of humanity would deny such a possibility of thinking beyond the self, of giving up self-interest and narcissism, whether conscious or otherwise. One of Marxism's lasting legacies has been a secularized and rationalist world-view. Previously mainly the religious person might recognize the possibility of transcending socially determined identities in an endeavor for social justice. Now, for many doing activist media making, comprehending reality and changing it is taken on gladly as an ethical responsibility. Thus many contemporary Indian documentary filmmakers show an awareness of the challenges they face in speaking for the Other, especially their privilege—of class, caste, gender or sexuality. However, within the documentary genre, there is a marked absence of narratives whose primary objective is to showcase the impossibility or refusal to represent the Other. Rather, Indian documentary's interest in depicting the Other, often without problematizing that very process, has continued unabated.

What is new in Indian documentary, however, is the insertion of the self in relation to the Other. In the filmmaking community, this represents a break with tradition that is quite strongly contested. In my discussions with filmmakers I encounter many filmmakers' distinct discomfort

Amongst the last shots of the film is this romantic moment as we see a child look past the bars for a season outside...

with personal and autobiographical voice. They say that a personal perspective is a narrative style imposed by jurying practices at international film festivals that now favor this kind of filmmaking. And the filmmakers need recognition at international film festivals, since screenings will follow in university campuses in North America and Europe, and grants from international agencies might be more effectively pursued. Since grants are now a major source of funding for Indian documentarists, given the exchange rates with the dollar, the filmmakers often feel they need to accommodate themselves to this kind of aesthetic pressure from abroad.

Both filmmakers whose work I discuss in this paper have received this kind of funding and international recognition. *Kumar Talkies* was funded by the Hubert Bo's Fund of the International Film Festival, Rotterdam; *A Season Outside* was commissioned by a non-profit Indian group that raised funds from various sources, including international funding agencies.[8] Interestingly, these filmmakers do not make work for festival success but rather define their primary audiences as Indian and locate themselves in relation to the Indian documentary tradition. This means that their films, like other political documentary work in India, is primarily screened in private homes, schools, community centers, university campuses, women's groups, and on improvised screens in urban slums.

Traditionally Indian documentary has emphasized the collective rather than the individual and thus has eschewed personal perspectives. As Tom Waugh has characterized it, the Indian documentary tradition overwhelmingly favored the didactic social documentary in the Griersonian mode; such a documentary approach was prevalent during the first four decades after independence in 1947.[9] In the 80s, Indian documentarists moved towards the direct cinema style prevalent in the West in the 60s, adopting its realist aesthetic and reliance on interviews while continuing to retain Griersonian voice-over narration.

However, as Waugh points out, in contrast to Western documentaries' emphasis on individual protagonists, Indian films relied on the collective in representing its subject, including the collective interview. In place of the private home was the street. Waugh contextualizes this formal aspect of documentary in the cultural, political, and economic imperatives of a post colonial society. Within this social formation and political orientation, the group rather than the individual and public spaces rather than private ones become the primary sites of political discourse and cultural expression.

To rely on isolating the individual, whether in representing a community or in teaching American film, Waugh argues, comes out of Western social ideology that validates the individual and its religio-cultural tradition based on confession. Films as diverse as *Roger and Me* and *Shoah* begin their analysis with an isolated individual confronting trauma. The talking head expert also hails from the confessional tradition—in this case, granting authority to the filmmaker's voice.

Another reason for the emphasis on the collective in Indian documentary is the left's general dismissal of the personal as bourgeois self-indulgence; such a view predominates among those who want to represent material conditions urgently in need of transformation. Moreover, filmmaking has significant expenses, as compared to writing poetry or fiction. Spending a large amount of money further imposes a political imperative to witness, record, inform, and analyze. If one is to spend a significant amount of money t make a film, rationalist evaluation of political use value often wins out over the more subjective and expressive aspects of filmmaking.

Consequently, until the 90s autobiographical, experimental or self-reflexive styles were virtually non-existent in Indian documentary. Now, a quick glance at Film South Asia, the Festival of South Asian Documentaries held in Nepal in October 2001, shows this to have changed. The films shown took up subjects previously considered personal, such as sexuality. And aesthetically, their forms varied, now also encompassing the diaristic, self-reflexive, experimental and poetic.

This new moment in Indian documentary was probably spurred by the Indian women's movement in the 80s, when this generation of filmmakers came of age. It also represents a widening of the aesthetic of the political documentary, now made at the intersection of the global demands of international film festivals and the demands of internal political struggles. Without lowering the stakes of documentary and still seeing it as a participant in political change, some of these new films have recovered one of the best traditions in Indian radical culture—poetry. Others have experimented with self-reflexivity. In discussing two films that, in my view, best exemplify this change I hope to show the challenges that underlie this reinvention of the documentary form.

A Season Outside

Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside* (India,1998, 30 minutes) is a lyrical and thoughtful film that asks viewers once again to examine why they might consider violence a valid response to violence.[10] The film begins with Kanwar on the Wagah border —the line that divides Pakistan and India—one amongst the crowd of strangers who gather around to watch the "change of guard" ceremony that happens there every evening. The sights and sounds of this place —voices, flags, barbed wires, badges, uniforms, people's faces, and, the border line itself—seem filled with the expectation of finding an answer to what spurred the violence of national partition in 1947.

Kanwar's camera confronts the present, as if for the first time, by stretching and fragmenting time. Beginning with a slow pan that starts from a lighted shed across the barbed wire fence at night, we see quickly cut together feet, identification badges, people, and colors. The ritualized military ceremony at the border becomes a slow dance whose fascination for our collective psyche lies in its repetitive performance of a violent past that will not lie at rest. Kanwar evokes the border both as the concrete evidence of violence and also as a symbol whose power runs deeper than its physical limits.

The film's power lies in the simplicity and minimalism of its structure, which is an interplay between Kanwar's voice-over narration, images and a sound track. The narration brings up the past as it connects Kanwar's personal family history to a larger history. He speaks his words in the nature of personal introspection. The camera, however, lives in the present in public. In contrast to the thoughtful, meditative quality of Kanwar's voice over, the present saturated with history meets the eye as the site of danger. A suggestive sound track that hints rather than screams connects the two, underlining the political urgency of examining the present and de-familiarizing it.

At one point in the opening sequence narration and image come together, poignantly indicating the contingency of the past upon the present, uncovering alternatives buried under violence and suggesting what might have been. Here Kanwar recounts in voice over Gandhi's testimony before the Hunter commission; there Gandhi defends his position on non-violence. The visuals show an Indian soldier at the border who raises his right hand, as if to take an oath. However, in contrast to Gandhi's defense of non-violence, the soldier's movement is part of military performance.

The voice over here speaks the filmmaker's subjective position but it also speaks for a collective. The film assumes that the viewer already has a position, an inevitable connection to the long history of violence in the country. It is this taken-for-granted, shared history of violence that becomes the fabric of which Kanwar's personal story is only one thread. He offers his story to to us to prompt us to examine our own decisions about how to respond to violence. As Kanwar uses the film as an occasion for his own introspection, in the process he uncompromisingly brings into public view the full extent to which violence is rooted inside us. The film's most haunting and lyrical moments underwrite this sense of being unable to stand outside or to find a "season outside" as violent assaults on human dignity saturate both the home and the world outside it, past and present.

Kanwar connects the slow, repetitious, hidden nature of domestic violence with public militaristic spectacle through a sequence of a street shot from inside a window. The camera and light inside the window remain stationary while the scenes on the street change quickly, highlighting the essential sameness of the relation of inside to outside. In voice over he recounts his mother's memory of women protecting themselves during the partition of India (1947) from riotous mobs by hammering nails in windows; at that time he had a recurrent dream of his mother with a hammer and nails but no windows. In another sequence a present day train traverses the same tracks as the 1947 trains filled with fleeing refugees and their corpses. It seems oddly strange as it moves in slow motion while the passengers wave to the camera.

The film's stance on non-violence as a personal commitment echoes Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha*, the struggle for truth. It calls upon the *satyagrahi*, one who strives for the truth, to be willing to die for one's truth but not to impose it on the other through violence. Gandhi's lesson is that all truth is ultimately relative. Appropriately, the film begins by quoting Gandhi in the narration and ends with his image on a television screen. The concluding narration recounts a dialogue between the filmmaker and a monk about violence with a monk; the essence of their conversation is the Gandhian position of *satyagraha*. This coming together of image and narration, an, the circular way in which the end echoes the beginning gives the film a closure that it has so far resisted. The film ends with a rather wistful hope that the key to the "season outside" lies in the "big eyes of a little child." At this point, we see the image of a child's face pressed against the gates of the Wagah border.

However, to posit here that the future can be seen in the eyes of a child is a conclusion that is sudden and romantic. It imposes a false sense of comfort that undercuts the film's overall power. Instead of presenting the child as the hope for the future, Kanwar would have been more consistent if he showed the child as most at risk. For me, the most impactful image from the end of the film is that of the adult man who stares back at Kanwar from across the gate of the border. That image leaves open the question of finding a "season outside" open but sees it under threat.

Continued: *Kumar Talkies*

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Kumar Talkies

Pankaj Rishi Kumar's *Kumar Talkies* (1999, 60 min) suggests another way in which a personal approach can be a springboard to examine the political.[11] The film is motivated, as Kumar narrates, by his his father's death four years ago. Kumar wanted to see what happened to the movie theater that his father had built in Kalpi, a small town in Western India. Beginning from this personal anecdote, the film details the place that Indian cinema occupies in the life of a small town, the marginalization of this town in the Indian economy, and the lives of those who consume Bombay films.

Kumar Talkies: A repeated shot of Pankaj with his mother indicates they are trying to arrive at the meaning of this theater in their family history but cannot do so.

Kumar not only makes explicit the act of filmmaking, he goes on to take apart the conventions by which the authority of the filmmaker is inscribed both inside the film and in the social context of film production itself. The latter social analysis of the mediamaker's authority sets *Kumar Talkies* apart from other autobiographical films marked by an "aesthetics of failure." Those autobiographies have no hesitation in revealing and even highlighting the process of filming but back off from examining the filmmaker's power.

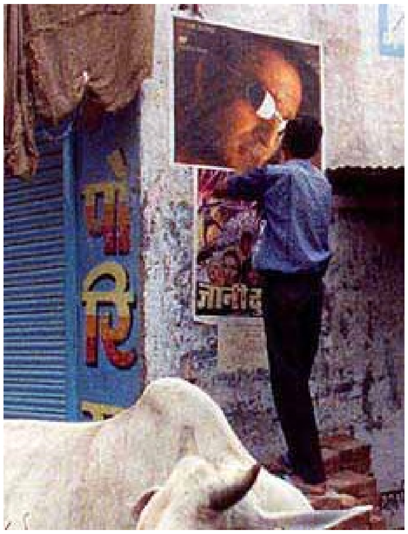
People arrive at the theater. Kumar uses his film to explore the place that Indian cinema occupies in the life of a small town, and the poverty and lives of these villagers who love popular romance films.

We see Kumar with a microphone, asking people if they would agree to be interviewed. We hear people advise him to shoot in the morning or evening rather than in the midday sun. We see the way he uses the cycle rickshaw as a dolly as he orders the rickshaw-puller to slow down, reverse and then go forward. No effort is made to establish a false pretense of invisibility or "seamless" filmmaking. People observe, discuss, and address Kumar as he goes around the town with his cameraman.

We also see his authority in organizing the film. One remarkable sequence shows clearly where the

The ticket window, shot from both the inside and the outside, is a repeated motif that alludes to cinema both as a business and a collective cultural sensibility.

power lies. While Kumar stands holding the microphone, a man walks up to him, puts his arm around the director, and announces in words that mimic a sequence from a popular feature film we have just seen clips of that he loves Kumar like his brother and will go with him to Bombay. The man seems quite the star of this sequence. He holds the attention of the camera, which turns off only when he's finished with his monologue. However, as the shot fades to black, we hear Kumar log that sequence. The man on the street's attention grabbing moment finally becomes just one sequence in Kumar's story, and the man's performance canned as part of Kumar's film with no hopes of realization in life. It is not he but his image who will travel with Kumar to Bombay.



Putting up movie posters before the opening of a film. The people whom Kumar interviews often strike poses and speak lines from Hindi films.

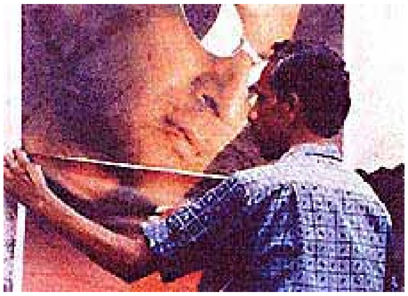
Further, Kumar makes apparent the power he wields on account of his class and his prestige as a filmmaker. Returning to Kalpi, he is a filmmaker from Bombay and the son of the man who started the only existing theater in town gives Kumar. This role as media figure gives Kumar access to both local elites and working class. At one point we see him request that the next screening in the cinema be postponed by half an hour so that he can finish interviewing the audience!

The camera clearly acts as a provocateur and so uncovers the place that cinema occupies in the imaginative and economic life of this small town. People act out in front of the camera, often strike poses, and speak lines from Hindi films. Their readiness to do so indicates the extent to which Hindi cinema's themes and postures are part of everyday life. What emerges is a complex picture of the way a crumbling movie theater represents the town's economic decline. The cinema is also a microcosm of the power relations that surround it. Thus, women cannot see films. And the "A class" people, as the local cable operator describes the upper income families, watch programs on their color televisions and do not fill the theater. Just as cinema replaced community folk performances of an earlier time, it now is being replaced by cable television.

Kumar's careful attention to the small, repetitive details of everyday village life echoes the mundane quality of running the theater in this town. The cinema faces repeated power outages and reels missed at the whims of the projectionist. Kumar includes repeated shots of the audience and of film reels carried over the small slope into the courtyard of the theater. Interviews and Hindi film songs paint an evocative picture of popular cinema's promises to lift viewers out of everyday life but its inability to do so.

The present owner of the theater. In his film, an autobiography, Kumar is not able to confront directly his father's decision to abandon the theater, which in fact was a pragmatic choice made for economic reasons. He thus frames many shots of the current owner as isolated and trapped in a small town.

However, Kumar is quite reticent about his own investment in this story. In particular, he fails to take up the question he starts the film with: to understand his father's relationship to cinema and to imagine his own life had he continued to live in Kalpi. At one level he raises a deeply private matter most of us have to deal with: coming to terms with a parent's death and inheriting some kind of legacy from them. At another level Kumar's choice to leave Kalpi, like his father's search for a career in commercial Bombay cinema, is about the human dimensions of the economic process known as capitalism. That is, capitalism relies on planned imbalances and areas of underdevelopment and these compel people's movement into urban centers, a movement experienced quite differently in terms of class. Finally, in recounting his personal narrative of a declining theater in a small town, Kumar appears to grapple with film's social meaning, especially when it is constrained by concepts of entertainment and profit.



Making movie posters and pasting them is a job that is sustained by the movie industry. Now, posters are increasingly generated through computer graphics pushing the workers who painted posters out of work.

Unlike Kanwar who uses a poetic voice over to weave his own personal and family history directly into that of the nation, Kumar's personal investigations do not easily trace larger sociopolitical connections. Yet Kumar opens up this task to the audience by making visible his awkwardness and inability to examine the personal so publicly. He does so by leaving images and questions unanswered in the film. For example, he is not able to confront directly his father's decision to abandon the theater, which in fact was a pragmatic choice made for economic reasons. Kumar displaces this inquiry onto the present owner of the theater, who took over the theater from his father. Kumar frames odd long shots of this man sitting alone on a chair as the camera looks down upon him from a height. The effect is that we see the image of a man trapped in a small town.

Kumar's interviews with his mother and family members also indicate his difficulties in locating his own motivations for making this film. He leaves unexplored his relative's claim that the entire film *Kalpi* is an exercise in nostalgia. Retaining such loose threads narratively speaking can be construed as a weakness in conventional film, both commercial and documentary. In this case, however, it is completely consistent with the whole film's openness about the mechanisms of its construction.

The autobiographical mode in both the above films, one openly autobiographical and the other resistant, opens up Indian documentary to exploring areas of collective subjectivity, including affect, memory, desire and hope. In Indian culture, there are areas previously left to poetry and song. In fact, the presence of leftist songwriters in popular Indian cinema, such as the late Kaifi Azmi and Sahir Ludhianvi, has ensured the popularity of radical poetry, although Indians otherwise have long appreciated protest verse. Even now people considered technically illiterate will recite poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz or Iqbal, and popular movements have left a rich oral tradition of song. However, while songs are such a staple feature of popular commercial film, they have yet to find their way into the documentary. In the light of that strong poetic and song tradition, then, I would have to conclude that although they incorporate emotion, neither of the two films I discuss comes close to adopting a form that would resonate like a protest song, although this form is now quite common in Indian street theater.

I base this conclusion on the fact that both the films are still quite tied to the rationalist discourse that has predominated Indian documentary, calling upon the audience to study, not sing, its conclusions. What is new is the fact that both the films set out to explore the objective and subjective, the interior and the external, and the human dimensions of economic and political factors. The autobiographical mode through which Kanwar connects his personal history to that of the nation allows him to explore memory and the collective psyche. In choosing a stance that is poetic and reflective, he places upon each individual viewer the responsibility to examine his/her stance on non-violence. This connection between individual responsibility and a collective stance on non-violence is consistent with Kanwar's largely Gandhian and Buddhist orientation. His aesthetic therefore coheres with his film's content and political purpose to generate discussion on communal violence.

Kumar's mode of address, more in keeping with documentary's traditional intellectualism, nevertheless dissolves into the poetic. It cannot resist its subject matter's affective resonance. The state of popular cinema in a time of economic decline represents the crushing of dreams by harsh material factors. As I have suggested this subjective experience of objective realities is most evocatively expressed in the gaps in Kumar's film; in the lyrical empty shots showing the current theater owner, the slope leading out of the theater, and most of all, popular film songs that Kumar does not reduce to sentimentality.

Significantly, both of these filmmakers have gone on to work on projects directly related to poetic expressions of political protest. Kumar has recently finished *The Play is On...* about the performances of Bhands, folk artists who perform satirical theater across war-ravaged Kashmir. Kanwar has just completed *A Night of Prophecy* based on diverse social movements' protest songs and poetry. In the work of other documentarists, this kind of thematic and stylistic shift to the personal has allowed an exploration of sexuality and gender. Examples of these films include *Our Boys* (Manare Hassin, Bangladesh, 1999), *A Rough Cut on the Life and Times of Lachuman Magar* (Dinesh Deokopta, Nepal, 2001), *Male Train* (Shiladitya Sanyal, India, 2000), *King of Dreams* (Amar Kanwar, 2001, India) and *My Friend Su* (Neeraj Bhasin, India 2001).

Of course, other Indian documentarists do echo the "Western" postmodern stance of bourgeois self-indulgence, narcissistic dwelling on the self, and identity politics. Any artist working in an autobiographical vein can refuse to connect one's personal story to the history of the collective or to reveal one's own historical and material position. Rather than dwell on those works, I have chosen to write about Indian films that extend the scope of the documentary, experimenting with both form and content, while retaining its commitment to interpret and change the world. I and many other filmmakers in and from India reject cynical and jaded postmodern obsessions with form, assertions that there is nothing new to be made but to quote and play with other representations. In the face of claims that there is no reality beyond subjective discursive interpretations, we need to assert that there are stories still to be told, lives to be represented, that cinema still matters. Otherwise documentary filmmakers who take as their subject the historical and material world we occupy may as well pack up and leave. For to engage with this world without humanism, hope or desire for social transformation is the luxury of the bourgeois intellectual, and he has never been on the wrong side of the tracks.

Continued: Notes

Notes

[1] "Poetry and Being." Translated by Rini Bhattacharya Mehta. In *Ghadar: A publication of the Forum of Indian Leftists*. Vol. 5: Number 2, July 21, 2002.
www.proxa.org/resources/ghadar/
v5n2/sukanto.html.
Sukanto Bhattacharya (1926-47) was a poet and political worker in the labor union movement in Bengal. He wrote songs and plays for the leftist Indian People's Theater Association and was the editor of the children's page for *Swadhinta* (Independence), the communist Bengal daily that first appeared in 1945.

[2] "Introduction." Translated by Naomi Lazard. *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1988. p. 3. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the leading socialist poet of the India/Pakistan (1911-84) spent several years in prison and in exile in Beirut.

[3] Loosely paraphrased form Faiz's poem "Elegy." Translated by Naomi Lazard. *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1988. p. 59

[4] Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics." Tom Waugh (ed.) *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. London: The Scarecrow Press. 1984. pp. 223-251.

[5] Paul Arthur. "Jargons of Authenticity." Michael Renov (ed.) *Theorizing Documentary*. AFI Film Readers: Los Angeles. 1993. Pp. 108-34.

[6] Bill Nichols. "'Getting to Know You...': Knowledge, Power and the Body." Michael Renov (ed.) *Theorizing Documentary*. AFI Film Readers: Los Angeles. 1993. Pp. 174-92.

[7] "Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary." Tom Waugh (ed.) *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. London:: The Scarecrow Press. 1984. pp. 318-43.

[8] Indian documentary is now mostly shot on video. Kanwar works

entirely in video while Kumar in both film and video.

[9] “Words of Command: Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary.” *CineAction*, No. 23, Winter 1991. pp. 28-39.

[10] The film won the Golden Conch Best Film at the 5th International Documentary Film Festival, Bombay 1998 and VHS copies can be obtained from the filmmaker by emailing him at amarvg@del13.vsnl.net.in

[11] VHS copies of the film can be obtained by emailing Pankaj Rishi Kumar at Kumartalkies@aol.com

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Chinese feminist film criticism

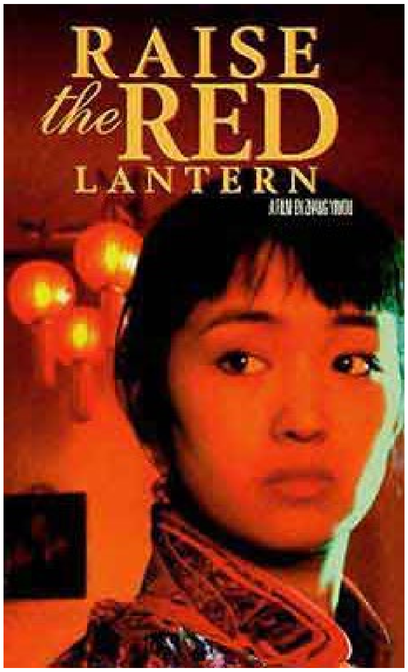
by Gina Marchetti

Dai Jinhua at Ohio State University.

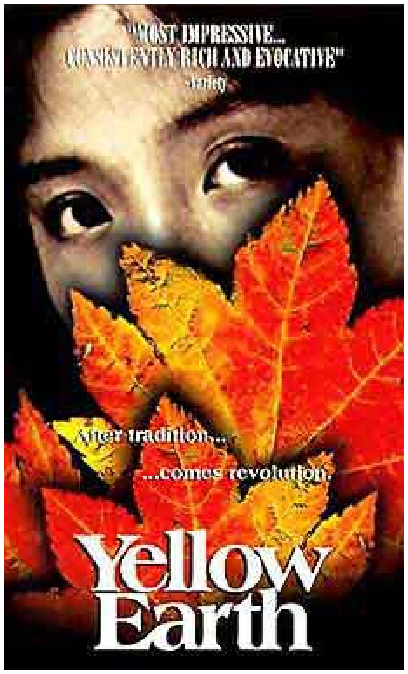
> Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, eds. Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow. London: Verso, 2002.[1]

Cinema and Desire brings together a selection of essays by Dai Jinhua, one of the People's Republic of China's most prolific film and cultural studies academics. This collection will certainly make her important critical voice more widely heard within the English-speaking world. Dai's essays have appeared in *positions: east asian culture critique* (edited by Tani E. Barlow, one of the editors of this volume); *Public Culture*; *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*; and other English-language publications. Before this book appeared, she was perhaps best known outside of China for her critique of the "self-Orientalizing" aspect of the work of filmmakers from China's Fifth Generation, specifically Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. In "Rewriting Chinese Women: Gender Production and Cultural Space in the Eighties and Nineties," Dai states:

> … as the eternal Other in a patriarchal society, women are made to act out a Chinese historical drama that replaces the Father's history with a new history of the Other, which is the self-Orientalizing male elite narrative… gory, cruel, and charming stories about women were not only going to resolve the strangeness and opaqueness of the complex Chinese male historical narrative but also win them a ticket 'to the world,' or the attention of the West.[2]



Raise the Red Lantern "raised the eyebrows" of some Chinese critics who wondered about the film’s address to a non-Chinese audience.



Yellow Earth is the film that first put China’s “Fifth Generation” on international film screens, where it garnered massive praise for cinematographer Zhang Yimou’s distinctive visual style.

Dai Jinhua is not the only Chinese feminist to take this position toward the films of Zhang and Chen, however. Another Dai—Dai Qing, the female dissident journalist perhaps best known for her commitment to ecology and condemnation of China’s Three Gorges Dam project—also made a similar argument in “Raised Eyebrows for *Raise the Red Lantern*.” Here, she states,

> This kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasures of foreigners.[3]

Rey Chow, among others, has criticized the above position. In *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, she writes:

> ...what Zhang is producing is rather an exhibitionist self-display that contains, in its very excessive modes, a critique of the voyeurism of orientalism itself. (Mis)construed by many as mere self-display (in the spirit of airing one’s dirty laundry in public), this exhibitionism—what we may call the Oriental’s orientalism—does not make its critique moralistically or resentfully. Instead, it turns the remnants of orientalism into elements of a new ethnography...this ethnography accepts the historical fact of orientalism and performs a critique (i.e., evaluation) of it by staging and parodying orientalism’s politics of visuality. In its self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing visual gestures, the Oriental’s orientalism is first and foremost a demonstration—the display of a tactic...If their glossy surfaces are the ‘myths’ that commodify and betray China, Zhang’s films nonetheless achieve for modern Chinese culture the attention and status that many sophisticated others fail to bring.[4]

In fact, many scholars have participated in debates surrounding the films of the Fifth Generation that Dai Jinhua engages in this collection, including Esther Yau, Jenny Lau, Chris Berry, Wang Yuejin, Zhang Yingjin, and Sheldon Lu, to name only a few writing in English. The fact that many scholars internationally have contributed to such a lively debate brings to light one of the disappointing aspects

Zhang Yimou at work filming. He has been accused of "self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing" visual gestures.

Moving between the United States and China, Chen Kaige, pictured here on location, continues to enjoy international prestige as one of the masters of the "self-Orientalizing male elite narrative."

of *Cinema and Desire*. That is, the book isolates Dai from her contemporaries both inside and outside of China.

In contrast, the reader gets a very different sense of Dai within the context of an emerging transnational feminist public sphere for Chinese women in Mayfair Yang's *Spaces of Their Own*[5] or in relation to other Asian film and media scholars in Jenny Lau's *Multiple Modernities*.[6] In *Cinema and Desire*, for all intents and purposes, Dai stands alone as a feminist and Marxist critic of contemporary Chinese culture. Although Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, and other feminist film scholars do get mentioned in passing, the positioning of Dai's work remains disconnected from the prodigious body of scholarship that now exists on feminism in China, Chinese cinema, media and contemporary culture. Given that Dai has spent much of her career translating European and American film theory into Chinese, it seems odd that she so seldom engages with the scholarship on Chinese cinema that has been produced by scholars based outside of China.

It also seems odd that the editors, themselves so knowledgeable about these debates as seen in their own scholarship (i.e., Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever*[7] and Tani Barlow's *Gender Politics in Modern China*[8]), should not make more of an attempt to place Dai within this intellectual context. Although the interview conducted with Dai by Lau Kin Chi that concludes the book is rather helpful, the brief introduction and even shorter biography of Dai does not do enough to inform the reader of the environment in which Dai works in China and her importance beyond China to scholars working on Chinese film and culture.

Ironically, like many of the Chinese filmmakers she criticizes, Dai and other Chinese intellectuals seek out and enjoy the interest and sponsorship of academics outside of China. Such recognition solidifies their position in China by letting them acquire an international reputation. While most academics hope to do research that will cross borders and make an impact around the world, this is particularly important for Chinese artists and intellectuals who often must look outside of China for validation or, in the case of filmmakers, funding, distribution, and exhibition venues outside of the tight monetary and censorship controls of the People's Republic. For filmmakers whose work is routinely banned in China and for intellectuals who take a critical stance toward government policies, international recognition can mean the difference between maintaining a career and losing all pubic voice.

However, these transnational ties need not be "Western" in the strictest sense. Writing in Chinese, Dai's work speaks to a global Chinese academic community, and Chinese scholars based in America often quote her. At this point in time, there is significantly greater contact among Chinese scholars based in the P.R.C., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries around the world, including the United States. The fact that many scholars writing in Chinese address their remarks to other Chinese scholars working in other languages outside of the People's Republic should be kept in mind. In 1997, Dai and Jing Wang, for example, began to collaborate on a major project involving Chinese popular culture, funded by the Luce Foundation. Wang, educated in Taiwan and the United States and based in the United States (teaching for most of her career at Duke and, more recently, at MIT), sought out the Beijing-educated and based Dai Jinhua for this project. As movement within the Chinese diaspora intensifies, the address of scholarship involving China becomes more complicated. A simple Chinese/Western split simply does not exist.

In many ways, the trajectory of Dai's career outside of China parallels the Fifth Generation filmmakers of whom she writes. By critiquing films that have captured awards at international film festivals and found their way into American art house distribution and home video outlets, Dai's work speaks about texts that circulate outside of China more easily than they do domestically. As a consequence, scholars in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States and elsewhere look to her for a critical perspective on these films.

In her writings, Dai describes contemporary films from the People's Republic as texts produced by filmmakers coming from a particular historical moment in China that travel as commodities about China for the rest of the world. The disjuncture between the moment of production and the films' various contexts for consumption forms the basis for her analysis of the Fifth Generation. She shows how filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige deal with their experience of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese history generally, and the complexities of gender, sexuality, Confucianism, and socialism within the Chinese imagination.

As a feminist, Dai does not unconditionally accept the representation of the brutalized woman in these films as a call for women's liberation. Rather she dissects the way in which women's bodies figure within a visual imagination that uses that body to deal with male filmmakers' own feelings of personal and political impotence as well as to create a spectacle of a victimized China for international consumption.

Born in 1959, Dai is younger than most of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, who like her entered college in 1978 to become the first generation to finish their studies after the Cultural Revolution. Because of this age difference, she does not have the same experience of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) as do other artists and intellectuals who were a few years older and more deeply marked by that period. After graduating from Beijing University, Dai took up a teaching position at the Beijing Film Academy, establishing a film theory major in 1987. Working under the auspices of Ni Zhen (screenwriter and professor of art direction/film theory at the Beijing Film Academy, 1980-2000)[9] and closely with her collaborator Meng Yue in her early work, Dai quickly established herself as an important presence within Chinese film theory.[10]

Cinema and Desire's bibliography of works by Dai lists an impressive twelve books, collections of essays, and edited volumes from 1989 to the present. In 1993, Dai moved to the more prestigious Beijing University, and, in 1995, she established its program in cultural studies. Dai has traveled widely in Asia and Europe. And she has lectured extensively in the United States at Ohio State University, Duke, Cornell, Pittsburgh, Harvard, various campuses in the University of California system, and other American universities. Dai’s work, thus, speaks to an audience within and outside of China.

Continued

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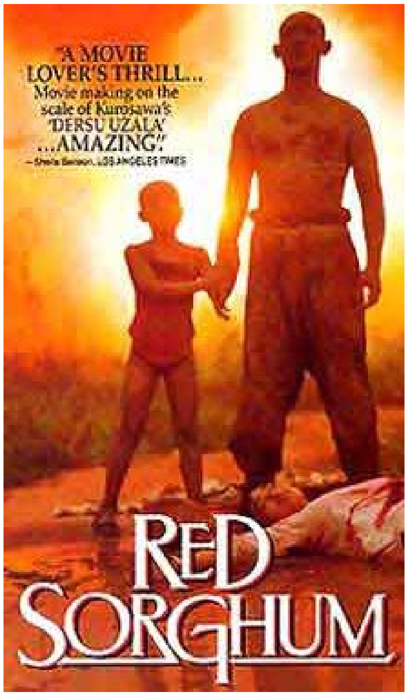
In the first essay collected in *Cinema and Desire*, “Severed Bridge: The Art of the Sons’ Generation,” Dai uses psychoanalytic theory inflected by Jacques Lacan to examine the early films from the Fifth Generation in relation to the filmmakers’ political and aesthetic coming of age during and after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. She refers to their films as “the art of the Sons.”(14)


"A MOVIE LOVER'S THRILL... Movie making on the scale of Kurosawa's 'DERSU UZALA' ...AMAZING."
—Sheila Benson, LOS ANGELES TIMES
RED SORGHUM

Red Sorghum was Zhang Yimou’s directorial debut.

She looks at *One and Eight, Horse Thief, Yellow Earth, The King of Children, Red Sorghum,* among other films, in terms of their contradictory interplay of searching for the roots of Chinese culture and identity in the post-Mao era while critiquing both traditional Chinese values and Maoist political doctrine. In her analysis of *Red Sorghum*, she notes the dialectical tension in that film between the creation of a new “national myth” (36) and the “onslaught of Western/Other culture” (33) in 1987. In the film, this tension is played out around female sexuality and the use of the female body as a sacrificial totem that

> symbolically assuages the collective anxiety and shock of the present-day Chinese, again faced with an onslaught from alien cultures.(44)

Gong Li as the title character in Zhang Yimou’s *Ju Dou*, a “gory, cruel, and charming” story that allegorizes the June crackdown in Tian'anmen

Reading this essay, I was struck by the similarities between Dai and Slavoj Zizek —both committed to Lacanian psychoanalysis and a Marxist critique in post-socialist societies. After 1989 (a year that had a cataclysmic, but very different impact on China and Eastern Europe), both chose to maintain a base in the East while lecturing and publishing extensively in the West. Both center their research on cinema and popular culture. Dai and Zizek seem to fulfill a need within cultural studies to reconfigure the Left academy in the West in relation to the East, to take stock of Freud, Lacan, Marx, and feminism after the end of the Cold War. Both also allow scholars in the West to look at their own cultural “symptoms” as commodity capitalism emerges out of the ruins of post-socialist societies.

Making this comparison, I am again struck by the lack of intellectual context provided by *Cinema and Desire*. Postmodernism becomes a passing reference to Fredric Jameson, cultural studies a chance remark about Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, and postcolonialism drifts as a concept without any reference to Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aijaz Ahmad, Arjun Appadurai, or Trinh T. Minh-ha.

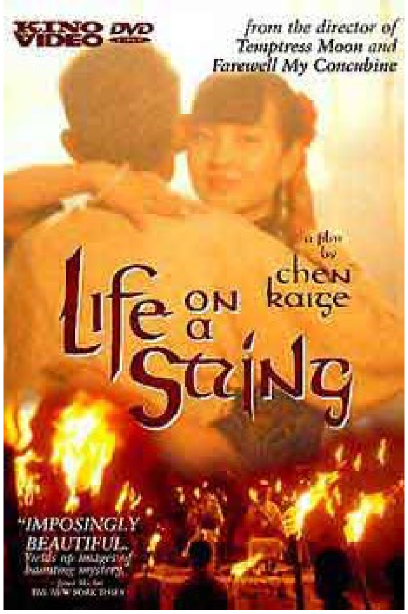
However, even without this theoretical context, Dai makes some very astute observations in her essay, "Postcolonialism and Chinese Cinema of the Nineties," which examines the post-1989 films of the Fifth Generation. The essay includes detailed analyses of *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *Life on a String* as postmodern products that put on "display the spectacle of an imagined preindustrial China"(51) for the Western audience. Dai observes that these banned films have an allegorical significance. Referring to *Ju Dou*, for example, she notes:

> In a certain way, it relates the heavy and painful emotions associated with the Tiananmen Square crackdown to the China of the nineties. (56)

However, Dai does not elaborate on this point, but, instead, moves quickly on to discuss *Raise the Red Lantern* as "representing history as discourse and facade for the Western gaze."(57) The in-between space of the banned political allegory and global commodity remains obscure. The ways these films have been read by Chinese viewers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and throughout the diaspora get no mention. Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien (best known for the controversial *City of Sadness*), for example, likely became involved with producing Zhang's *Raise the Red Lantern* for reasons other than its obvious appeal to Orientalist fantasies and fetishism of the Asian female body. Hou, like Zhang, has an investment in political allegories involving Chinese politics. His support for Zhang who was working across the Taiwanese straits on the same critical endeavor likely complemented any interest he may have had in the financial returns on a project appealing to the Orientalist voyeurism of the European or American viewer.

"A Scene in the Fog: Reading the Sixth Generation Films" looks at the sea change that took place as a

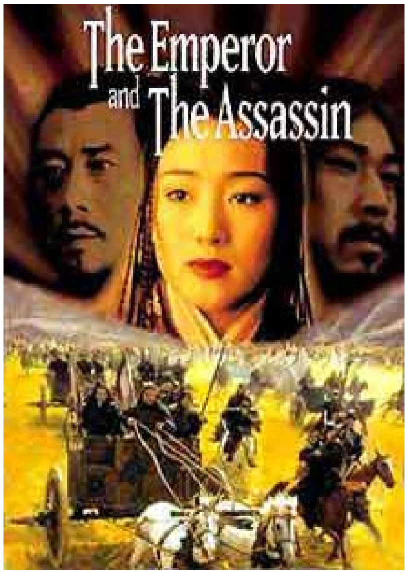
Square.



Although it was not one of Chen Kaige's critical successes, Dai Jinhua devotes serious attention to this fable about deferred hopes.

In this enormously

successful film, Chen Kaige chronicles the history of China from the Republican era through the Cultural Revolution, against the backdrop of the opera stage.


The Emperor and The Assassin

This less successful of Chen Kaige's works depicts the saga of the first emperor to unite China. Implicitly the plot comments on current power politics in the People's Republic.

Female director Huang Shuqin's *Woman, Human, Demon* uses Chinese opera

younger generation of filmmakers began to emerge on the film scene in the nineties, including Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Wu Wenguang. Unlike the "Fifth Generation" that refers to a specific graduating class from the Beijing Film Academy, the "Sixth Generation" label covers filmmakers from various backgrounds. These include younger self-financed or foreign-financed filmmakers, graduates of the Academy after 1989 who may or may not work in "official" film channels, documentary filmmakers associated with various politically dissident or avant-garde art movements, and others falling under the category of "underground" filmmakers who work in amateur formats and who may have no formal production training. Dai rightly notes that these filmmakers work in a social, political, and economic climate dramatically different from the previous decade:

> Complex as eighties Chinese culture is, it is still subject to integration into 'modernity,' on the basis of a common desire for progress, social democracy, and national prosperity, and by virtue of its resistance to historical inertia and the stronghold of mainstream ideology. In the nineties, however, the following elements feed a different sociocultural situation: the ambiguous ideology of the post-Cold War era; the implosion and diffusion of mainstream ideology; global capitalism's tidal force and the resistance of nationalisms and nativisms; the penetration and impact of global capital on local cultural industries; cultures' increasing commercialization in global and local culture markets; and the active role local intellectuals, besieged by postmodern and postcolonial discourse, have undertaken in their writing. (71-2)

The Sixth Generation has been associated with very different themes from the Fifth Generation. The younger filmmakers are concerned with the immediacy of the street, with contemporary city life (particularly in Beijing), with youth culture, rock music, and a punk inspired counter-cultural "anti-aesthetic," along with a critical, sometimes self-absorbed or nihilistic view of Chinese culture and society. Moving away from Lacanian analysis, Dai becomes more descriptive in this essay, focusing on to explore issues of gender identity and sexual politics in the People's Republic.

the distinctive qualities of the films of the Sixth Generation and their relationship to their Western patrons as well as China's booming "underground" scene.

The next two essays focus on women in Chinese film, women filmmakers, and feminist readings of Chinese cinema. "Gender and Narration: Women in Contemporary Chinese Film" provides a sweeping overview of women in Chinese history, depictions of women in pre- and post-1949 cinema. It has a special emphasis on the long career of the melodramatist Xie Jin, and concludes with a discussion of the work of women filmmakers in China. Edited from a longer manuscript, this chapter tends to drift off on tangents out of line with its apparent focus on the depiction of women in Chinese film. While some readers may not be familiar with the legendary Hua Mulan, the Chinese "new woman" of the May Fourth movement (embodied by the actress Ruan Ling-yu), the "White Haired Girl" or the "Women's Red Army Detachment" (a.k.a. "Red Detachment of Women") of Mao's "revolutionary romanticism" (both made into films on more than one occasion), this scattered background information does not always support the chapter's exploration of women in Chinese film. Dai's discussion of Xie Jin and the changing dynamics of women in relation to class structure and the political vicissitudes of post-1949 China marks a high point in this chapter. However, more detailed analyses of films by women filmmakers like Zhang Nuanxin, Li Shaohong, Hu Mei, and Ning Ying in relation to contemporary political and economic changes in China would have been welcome.

Dai does, indeed, look closely at Huang Shuqin's *Human, Woman, Demon* (1987)[11] in the following chapter. Here, Dai's allegorical reading of the film in relation to Chinese opera adds to an appreciation of this critically neglected film as a key work within the genre of opera film allegories so important to Chinese film history. Unfortunately, however, Dai does not connect this film to others within this tradition, such as Xie Jin's *Two Stage Sisters* (1965) or Chen Kaige's more recent *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Unlike other films in this tradition, *Human, Woman, Demon* focuses more on the performance of gender roles, the continuing burden of male privilege, and the particularity of the woman's voice in the narrative to a degree that overshadows the broader political allegory. While Dai notes the film's feminist perspective, she does not tease out what makes this film distinct within the genre by comparing it to similar films.

The last three essays, arguably the best, deal with television, consumerism, and the rise of commodity culture in China in the 1990s. “Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s” astutely dissects the transposition of the image culture associated with politics into the visual spectacle of consumer capitalism. Her case study consists of looking at the vogue for Mao Zedong memorabilia. Dai associates this sort of nostalgia with the drive toward “redemptive memory” (174) for former Red Guards and the “educated youth” sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution to recuperate their past by turning traces of their experiences into commodities.

Ironically, some of these popular materials like the song, “Xiaofang,” have been received differently by the displaced peasants. These people now find themselves on the bottom rung of China’s urban economy. For them, feelings of lost love and the simplicity of country living resonate quite differently than for the upwardly mobile “returned” youth generation who find themselves entering China’s new “middle classes,” putting their “radical” pasts behind.

Continued

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Blush, dir. Li Shaohong, looks at sexual politics against the backdrop of the campaign to rehabilitate and re-educate prostitutes after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949.

"National Identity in the Hall of Mirrors" looks at a range of television serials, such as *Yearnings* and *Beijinger in New York*,[12] as well as a number of memoirs and autobiographical novels written by Chinese nationals (mainly women) living abroad. In this essay, Dai looks at the Chinese immigrant experience, especially in relation to discourses involving race and class in the United States. She teases out the Chinese cultural nationalism of many of these narratives, which showcase stories of class mobility and material success in the United States in order to demonstrate Chinese superiority over African Americans and working class U.S. ethnics. In other narratives that focus on the painful process of succeeding in the United States, the consequences of class divisions in capitalism are seen as an "American" or "Western" problem rather than a reality of the dramatic economic changes taking place in China now. Thus, all the troubling aspects of capitalism become narrated as "foreign" problems unrelated to Chinese post-socialist economic policies.

In "Invisible Writing: The Politics of Mass Culture in the 1990s," Dai looks at the changing meaning of the "square" (*guangchang*) in Chinese popular discourse before and after 1989. As she traces the evolution of the meaning of Tian'anmen Square in the popular imagination, Dai analyzes the ways in which public space has metamorphosed from political arena to commercial marketplace. In this essay, Dai confronts the ideological changes that have taken place with regard to the meaning of Tian'anmen Square since 1989:

Portrait of director Li Shaong.

The particular guangchang where the student demonstration was crushed in 1989 has become a deeply complex taboo: it symbolizes the socialist system but also the toppling of that system. So to name a commercial plaza a guangchang, to change the political meaning of guangchang, or at the very least to mask the significance of political mass movements with a happy shoppers' heaven, is a transformation that is by no means innocent. (220)

For Fun, dir. Ning Ying, offers a contemporary urban story of a group of opera-loving retirees.

Dai carefully critiques the way in which Chinese popular culture has dealt with the emergence of a new class of consumer at the expense of the unemployed, the working classes, and others who no longer can rely on what had been taken-for-granted social services (e.g., health care, housing, etc.) In China, discourses of consumerism laud “individualism” and “self-reliance.” But popular celebrations of the “traditional” family and filial piety place the onus of nursing the sick, unemployment, care of the elderly and incapacitated back on the family; the government has dismantled the health care system and the employment guarantees of the “iron rice bowl.” As the economy privatizes, factories close, work units disband, communes become a thing of the past, and large segments of the population suffer due to the elimination of social services these socialist institutions provided in the past.

On the Beat, dir. Ning Ying, deals with the changing role of the police in China after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping.

Here, Dai is at her best. She calls for Chinese intellectuals to use Marxist theory beyond the “official” iterations of Communist Party doctrine in order to critique these devastating political, economic, and social developments. Women have been particularly hard hit by these changes. The revival of the “traditional” family and Confucian principles require women to shoulder the brunt of the increased domestic labor. Burdensome demands to care for the elderly, the ill, and the young are placed on the family newly bereft of guaranteed employment, health care, housing, day care, and other socialist support services.

In the past,the “official” feminism and Marxism of the Marriage Law of 1950 criminalized many “traditional” practices like concubinage. But this level of advance cannot muster the strength to combat the objectification of women within Chinese consumerism and the impoverishment of Chinese women within the new global economy. Therefore, Dai urges the Chinese “left” to reinvent itself and re-imagine Marxism and feminism in order to critique the current dismantling of socialism and rise of a new gender and class hierarchy on the backs of women, the poor, and the working classes. Thus, Dai’s Marxist analysis complements her feminism.

Overall, most of the essays in this collection may be of more value to those who already have a foundation in Chinese cinema history or who understand the development of the women's movement in China. Some essays, particularly the last ones collected here, speak to a general readership. However, the quality and accessibility of the essays vary greatly. Likely, some of the uneven quality of the collection reflects the evolution of Dai's writing as well as the varied approaches of the eleven translators who worked on the book. Many of the translators, like Edward Gunn (Cornell), are very well established Chinese language and literature scholars; others have more of a commitment to Chinese cinema (e.g., Harry Kuoshu, Shu-mei Shih, Yiman Wang); still others are graduate and undergraduate students just beginning their careers.

Unfortunately, other difficulties in the translation of Chinese theoretical and critical essays from the People's Republic persist, and these can be very hard to overcome. For example, Dai uses certain catch phrases repeatedly in her writings (e.g., "broken bridges," "floating bridges," "going from the frying pan into the fire," etc.) that she assumes have meaning beyond the obvious clichés. It should come as no surprise that many Chinese critics speak and write elliptically out of habit. Chinese artists and intellectuals face many difficulties when they attempt to speak directly about sensitive political issues and events that predate 1989 but have, understandably, been exacerbated since. While this discursive style fulfills an important function within the context of Chinese intellectual circles, it can perplex or annoy the English-language reader.

To complicate matters, this elliptical language may indicate to some outside of China that Dai is a political dissident. She is not. Her position does often deviate from official policy and she is an outspoken critic of some of the consequences of Deng's economic policies and the current continuation of those policies in the post-Deng era. But she does not set herself against or outside the government in any way that would preclude the publication of her books and essays, her free travel inside and outside of China, and her ability to advance her career within the Chinese academy. The book's editors praise Dai for deciding not to pursue graduate education outside of China when she had the opportunity after 1989. Regrettably the consequence of that decision limited Dai's ability to sharpen her critique as a Marxist and a feminist outside the Chinese educational system, where draconian measures are often taken to silence dissident voices.

Dai's scholarship must be understood within this context, and her position should not be misrepresented or mistaken for something it is not. In fact, the book would have benefited from a more direct discussion of Dai's role in relation to the Chinese academy before and after 1989. Again, the parallels between Dai and the Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou come to the fore. Zhang continues to reside in China, as does Tian Zhuangzhuang, Huang Jianxin, and others, while Chen Kaige left. The consequences of those physical locations, personal choices, and political perspectives continue to complicate our understanding of the People's Republic, its cinema, and its intellectual culture.

At the same time that I offer this critique, the importance of Dai's critique within the Chinese academy should not be underestimated. As China rushes to integrate itself within a global economy dominated by U.S. business interests, the world needs more scholars speaking out against the impoverishment of the vast majority of the Chinese populace in the process. The Chinese people have seen the erosion of the social services and the civic guarantees which socialism did, indeed, deliver to most. Dai analyzes the consequences of new and wider class divisions within China's capitalist, consumerist society, which is still plagued by the excesses and corruption of an aging bureaucracy. With these dramatic changes, women in China suffer as cheap labor easy to exploit within the new economy, as potential "consumers" bombarded by the spectacle of global capitalism, and as "old cadres" who may have benefited from the communist bureaucracy but who are now depicted as hopelessly out of step with a new, potent, "masculine," market economy.

As such political tensions find expression in cinema and popular culture, Dai serves as an important critical voice that merits consideration. This translation of her essays is welcome. Despite some inelegant prose, poorly argued assertions, embryonic analyses, and inchoate theories, this volume provides valuable insight into the current state of Chinese film theory and cultural studies.

Continued: Notes

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Notes

[1] Special thanks to Yeh Yueh-Yu for her help in the preparation of this review.

[2] Dai Jinhua, “Rewriting Chinese Women: Gender Production and Cultural Space in the Eighties and Nineties,” trans. Yu Ning with Mayfair Yang, *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), pp. 198-199.

[3] Dai Qing, “Raised Eyebrows for *Raise the Red Lantern*,” trans. Jeanne Tai, *Pubic Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 1993), p. 336 (333-337). Jane Ying Zha ruminates on this as well in the same issue of *Public Culture* in her essay, “Excerpts form ‘Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism,’” *Public Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 1993), pp. 329-332. Under the name Jianying Zha, she continues her critique in her book *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are transforming a Culture* (NY: The New Press, 1995).

[4] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 171-2.

[5] Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, ed. *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

[6] Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, ed. *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural Asia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

[7] Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[8] Tani E. Barlow, ed. *Gender Politics in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Barlow was among the first American educators allowed into the People’s Republic after the Cultural Revolution, and she writes about her experiences in Tani E. Barlow and Donald M. Lowe, *Teaching China’s Lost Generation: Foreign Experts in the People’s Republic of China* (San Francisco: China Books, 1987). Portions of this book were excerpted in *Jump Cut* #34

(March 1989).

[9] Ni Zhen, *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China's Fifth Generation*, trans. Chris Berry (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[10] To get some sense of how film theory is understood in the People's Republic, see George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, Hou Jianping, eds., *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990). Many of the essayists featured in this volume have been involved with the Beijing Film Academy in some capacity.

[11] The Chinese title, *Ren Gui Qing*, is usually translated as *Woman, Demon, Human*. Literally, it is closer to "human-ghost feelings" or "human-ghost intimacies." I don't know why the title more commonly used in English language versions of the film is not used here. Other common titles for films like Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (1993) and Xie Jin's *The Last Aristocrats* (1989) are also rendered differently in this book.

[12] For more on Chinese soap operas, see Sheldon Lu, "Soap Opera in China: The Transnational Politics of Visuality, Sexuality, and Masculinity," *Cinema Journal* 40:1 (Fall 2000), pp. 25-47.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Received wisdom: three reception studies

by Tomas Kemper

> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York University Press, 2000); 242 pages
>
> Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York University Press, 2000); 221 pages
>
> Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York University, 2002); 273 pages; with illustrations

Silence of the Lambs—Janet Staiger argues that all film spectators are more or less "perverse" in that they use films in their own way.

Silence of the Lambs—Every spectator brings her own schemata to the cinema, that is her individual social formation and psychological and sociological dynamics.

Increasingly, film scholars are fleeing the dark, murky theaters of pure theory and returning to the illuminating, refreshing air of the archives. By far, the most exciting work in film studies today has been informed by a blossoming of archival work, which combs material documents to shed light on film history. Such activity represents more than a simple return to film history. It expands the objects of study beyond the confines of the films themselves, and it looks closely at the material documents of journalism, legal contracts, distribution patterns, trade journals, and exhibition programs and moves beyond that to explore wider arenas such as the sites of exhibition and contexts of reception. This material documentation offers a balance and tangible support to theoretical speculation and interpretation.

Janet Staiger's work develops in both of the above directions. Two of her recent books offer a continuation of the research agenda presented in her groundbreaking and influential 1992 book *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. In *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era* (New York University Press, 2000) Staiger sets out to examine the circulation of discourses from texts through audiences, approaching an understanding of why certain works prove salient to audiences at certain times.

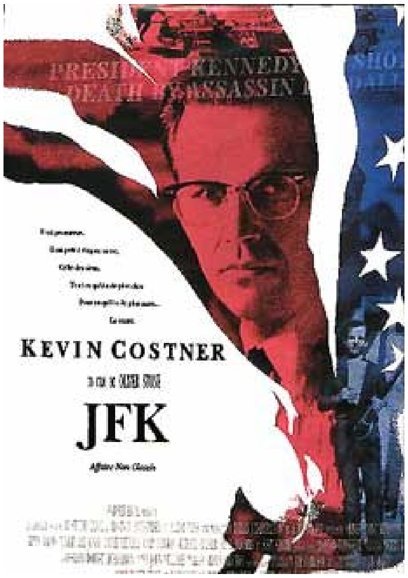
The controversy surrounding *A Clockwork Orange*'s reception illustrates the ideological stakes governing different spectatorial positions.

Her *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York University Press, 2000) offers a variety of essays examining various cases of films and their reception by diverse audiences. She wittily summarizes her approach in the "perversity" of the titular spectators, a description that Staiger applies to all audiences. Staiger argues that all spectators are more or less "perverse" in that they "use" films in their own way. Staiger contends that contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that we as spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives.

A Clockwork Orange—Staiger analyzes agendas and strategies that shaped different interpretations of this film. She regards the controversy around it as a battle of discourses.

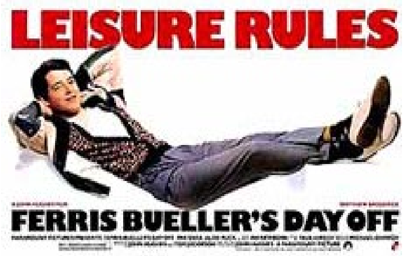
Thus, Staiger offers a radical counter-approach to traditional film-centered analysis (from "pure" formalism to deconstruction). In fact, an even more recent example of reception analysis, Annette Kuhn's fascinating *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York University, 2002), which examines the dialogue between British audiences and cinema in the 1930s, springs directly from Staiger's work, demonstrating the latter's important influence in carving out new approaches to understanding the film experience.

Each of the dozen essays in Staiger's *Perverse Spectators* centers on a specific historical topic, examining questions that arise out of the particular cases. While Staiger never outlines a general manifesto of reception theory, she proceeds from a consistent set of assumptions or guiding principles that underline each of the essays in this book. First of all, she denies immanent meaning in a film. In other words, the "meaning" of a film is not fixed within the film. Instead, Staiger argues that spectators activate meaning through their interaction with the film.



As Staiger analyzes *JFK*'s reception, she offers a sobering debunking of the hysterical postmodern readings that the film generated.

For Staiger, *JFK*'s reception reveals a battle between official and popular versions of history.



“Pure” spectators do not exist. Social formations offer an explanation of the spectatorial interpretative strategies and affective responses. Finally, spectator response is not unified; the historical context surrounding the reception of a film is heterogeneous and contradictory.

Thus, Staiger works against the idea that form determines interpretation, that certain forms determine certain responses, and that the spectator plays a passive role in this process. Staiger stresses,

> Contextual factors rather than textual material or reader psychologies as most important in illuminating the reading process or interpretation. (xi)

Reception study seeks to unravel the assumptions and theoretical tools working within the discourse surrounding reception. Spectators bring identities (consciously or unconsciously constructed) and interpretative strategies and tactics to the cinema. These schemata, social formations, psychological, and sociological dynamics form the subject of reception analysis. Isolating these elements through historical and textual analysis of the discourse helps us to understand the dynamics of the artistic experience.

While Staiger argues against the notion of a fixed singular meaning to a particular film, her approach avoids simplistic relativism. She does not argue, for example, that films produce an “undecidable” infinity of interpretations. Staiger sees a limit to the potential meanings attributed to a film. Any film may mobilize various responses and interpretations, but the historically available parameters of interpretative strategies restrict the range of interpretations. Furthermore, relativism is contained by the fact that the films themselves supply limited variations for interpretative

An amusing chapter in *Perverse Spectators* explores how filmgoers carved out potentially alternative spectator positions in *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*.

In a highly speculative chapter Staiger explores how *Blonde Venus* could have been viewed as a parody, based on public knowledge about Marlene Dietrich.

Blonde Venus —Even in its most speculative examples, reception study attempts to broaden film analysis to take into account diverse audience experiences.

strategies. Therefore, the film itself curbs or limits the set of interpretations.

A key problem for academic critics remains the analysis of artworks from other eras. How do we talk about the films from other eras, given the way meaning is produced through interaction with the artwork? How do we capture the experience of these artworks? In answering such questions, Staiger would theoretically examine a variety of responses, from critical responses to more quotidian sources like spectators' reactions in diaries, private conversations, and letters. Practically, however, Staiger must work with a limited set of available resources. She generally scrutinizes journalistic responses to films, from reviews to letters to the editor to gossip columns. These documents are used as clues to the general understanding of films from other periods, by examining the discursive strategies governing such sources.

Thus, reception study attempts to illuminate the cultural meanings of films in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers. Moving beyond film-centered analysis, in turn, allows us to discuss both the film and the spectator(s) in an effort to understand the creation of meaning in art. This dynamic approach (dynamic in the sense that it sets up a relational rather than a simply monolithic approach to art) assumes an interactive play between the film and the spectator, as opposed to positioning the film in a dominant role, solely determining strict levels of meaning.

Staiger's object of analysis, therefore, becomes an "event" or "experience," not simply a film. The object of analysis becomes the spectator's (or set of spectators) encounter with an artwork and the set of interpretations or affective experiences produced from this event within a social situation. This analysis may include those formal elements of the film that might facilitate certain interpretations (for example, character types, casting, editing, narrative acts of violence). But the analysis moves beyond the explication of the function or meaning of the film.

Instead, "traces" of the encounter between audiences and films form the documents for

Staiger demonstrates how certain audiences read *Blonde Venus* in relation to Dietrich's rumored romances.

reception analysis. The ready availability of film criticism clearly marks such material as primary sources for research. However, analysis can be extended to include advertisements, illustrations, letters, fan mail—all "traces" of the meaning circulating around films. These satellite texts naturally orbit around a film, so Staiger's gravitation toward such material seems logical and justified. These "traces" are then described, positioned, dissected, and mined for suggestions. But Staiger carefully avoids merely evaluating the validity of culturally produced meanings. In other words, the "traces"— from fan reactions to critical responses—are not measured against some fixed interpretation of the film. Staiger explores these texts for what they reveal about the significance of a film: not what the text means per se, but what (and why) it means for spectators. Staiger shows no interest in simply declaring the meaning of certain films, but seeks to discover why and how films are said to mean certain things for audiences.

Staiger's examination of this interaction between spectators and films factors in the following considerations:

1) the address of the film. Staiger acknowledges that different films address spectators in different ways. A particular film expects its audience to apply a certain set of schemata for understanding the film. Staiger encourages a closer inspection of such schemata (for example, a spectator's aesthetic values, taste, education) as a way of demystifying the artistic experience;

2) the conditions of exhibition. Staiger alerts us to the ways in which the institutions surrounding the presentation of a film elicit a certain understanding of the work.

3) The personal interpretive behaviors of the spectator. Almost a third of the essays in this collection are devoted to exploring how particular audience groups responded to and used films. In such cases, Staiger scrutinizes the roles of the spectator's race, gender, and cultural identifications and how these factors play a role in a spectator's interaction with a film.

For example, the controversy surrounding the reception of *A Clockwork Orange* illustrates for Staiger the ideological stakes governing the different positions in public discourse on the relation of media violence and real-life behaviors. On the one hand, writers argued that the film's aestheticized depiction of violence would either desensitize young viewers or inspire imitations. On the other hand, feminists attacked the film for its association of violence and sexuality. Defenders of the film either attributed these elements to the novel or positioned the film in a tradition of pure art. As Staiger reveals, all of the critical positions pivoted on the potential significance of the film's effects.

Staiger's examination of the critical reception of Oliver Stone's *JFK* debunks the mystifying metaphysics of postmodernist academic claims about the fuzzy demarcation between fact and fiction, an uncertainty allegedly symptomatic of contemporary culture. Through her meticulous examination of a wide variety of journalistic responses to the film, Staiger finds that what is at stake in the *JFK* controversy is not a blurring of the line between documentary and dramatic re-enactments, but the battle between official versions and popular versions of history, or, in this case, between the official Warren Commission story and the widespread counter-histories, the conspiratorial perspectives partially represented and potentially "authorized" by *JFK*.

I should add here that Staiger does not limit her studies only to films that set off shockwaves rippling through the cultural discourse. In the book's first essay, she offers a nuanced and useful survey of the speculations on histories of reception presented in the work of Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, and Timothy Corrigan. Staiger's individual essay topics range from 1960s underground cinema to *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*. The former essay explores the American experimental film scene in relation to 1960s sexual politics, examining the discourse of identity politics circulating within the critical reception of these films and how the exhibition sites offered spaces for subcultural community connections. The latter essay offers a highly informative and amusing survey of how spectators might find alternative subject positions and sources of identification in relation to various minor characters in *Ferris Beuller's Day Off*. In another essay, and an admittedly speculative one, Staiger argues that public knowledge about Marlene Dietrich at the time of Blonde Venus's release may have contributed to viewing the film more as a parody than a traditional melodrama. In another valuable chapter, Staiger offers a thorough historical examination of how genres were discussed by critics and trade journals in the classical Hollywood period, undermining academic definitions of genre purity.

The essays in *Perverse Spectators* foreground the "contact zone" between a film and its reception, how films galvanize interpretations like lightning rods; but "shocking" films are only one (however attractive) wavelength on the reception study spectrum. This strategy demands both rigor and nuance. A brief survey cannot do justice to Staiger's rich, rewarding work. The writing style is refreshingly lucid, even while she negotiates complicated ideas and diverse spectator positions.

Pure formalism (including, for example, the school of neoformalism practiced and proctored by Staiger's colleagues David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson) focused on the general structure and tools for explaining how an artwork is put together, how its internal mechanics and its various functions work. Proceeding from the principle that the form or structure of an artwork represented a viable communicative instrument (as much as the "content"), the most severe formalists argued that analysis could be (even should be) autonomous, unconcerned with the artwork's "origins," its history, or with its surrounding context. From this view, the scholar could ferret out the artwork's meaning simply by analyzing its internal components and their functions. (Of course, as Kristin Thompson points out, the Russian Formalists were never uncompromising in the way they are sometimes painted. Their analytical tool-kit included such concepts as "norms" and "realistic motivation," both of which "open" up the text to context.) While neoformalist analysis allows for a wide variety of analytical approaches, including the cultural and historical elements that enter into a work, the artwork is nonetheless viewed as an object, as opposed to an experience or process.

Reception study represents, then, even in its most speculative examples, a radical attempt to expose our analysis of artworks like films to the diverse experiences and schemata brought to bear on the works by audiences. This effort to move beyond autonomous analysis of the text has some precedent in poststructuralist theoretical approaches. Like deconstruction, reception study views the artwork (film, book, painting) as an unstable text; the artwork is not seen as a force which determines a single meaning; it can be unraveled or "read" (understood) in different, non-exclusionary ways. However, unlike the impervious, pan-textual world of deconstruction, reception study roots its analysis in material and historical analysis, supporting its claims with tangible documents.

As far back as 1968's *S/Z*, Roland Barthes expanded upon a wide variety of formalist principles in his study of reading. Barthes' work famously explored the cultural voices informing (infecting) any artwork, unwinding the text's polyphonic structure and thereby offering an analytical model in distinct contrast from traditional univocal formalism (i.e., criticism which focused on a single unifying thematic meaning within a work). The most pronounced way in which Barthes broke the spell of traditional criticism (or expanded formalism) was his effort to "hear" the reader (so to speak) in the work: "To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them." (11) For Barthes the reader is not an innocent subject and is already a "plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost." (10)

While we may not want to move into the "infinite" with Barthes (and fall through the void like some post-structuralist "Star-Child"), we can acknowledge the fascinating question Barthes raises: how do we disentangle the voices in a text when our own reading is mingled with other voices? Barthes failed to pursue his own teasing question; faced with this "infinity" he only saw himself getting "lost," as revealed in his rather enervated choice of words.

Reception study offers a stronger approach to these questions. Instead of slipping into the vertiginous, despairing relativism of Derrida and

Barthes, reception study proposes a rigorous examination of the tangible historical and sociopolitical interpretations surrounding an artwork, rooting its analysis and speculation through a nuanced, demanding methodology (outlined above).

Continued: Reception study and film/television analysis

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

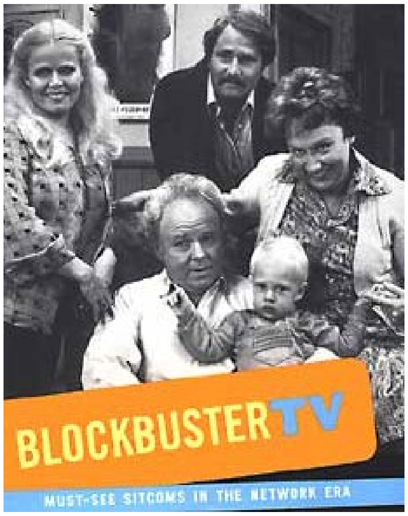
Reception study applied to film and television analysis

Nightmare on Elm Street— Traditional formalism haunts Carol Clover's audience analysis in her key work, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

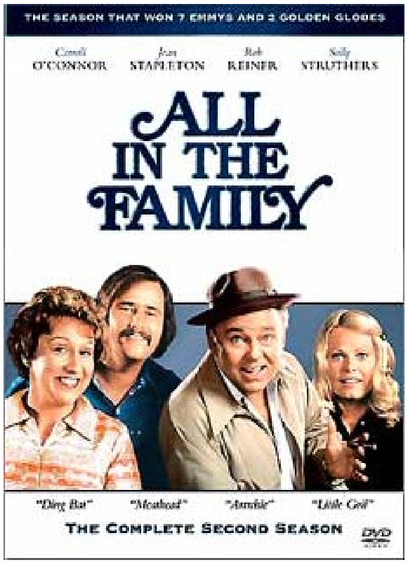
Nightmare on Elm Street— Classical film theory dreamed up an ahistorical, immaterial film spectator.

Most of the theories that dominated film studies in the 1970s and 1980s— from structuralist/formalist criticism to psychoanalytic criticism— assumed homogeneity amongst audiences, even when they raised the issue of the spectator's experience. They tended to represent the spectators ahistorically (if and when they addressed this issue at all). To take but one fairly recent example, Carol Clover's fascinating, and indeed ground-breaking *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (UC Press, 1992)— an examination of audiences drawn to slasher films—betrayed the author's formalist (and folkloric) roots in her attempts to explain the psycho-dynamics of adolescent male spectators by focusing her analysis almost exclusively on the formal structure of slasher films. In other words, Clover's conclusions about spectatorial desire were based entirely on textual analysis, creating a theoretical/ahistorical model of a teenage boy.

In contrast, Staiger's methodology offers a way of confronting the problematic issue of textual interpretation. As stated earlier, Staiger assumes that an accurate translation or reconstruction of the immanent meaning of an artwork is questionable or impossible. Instead, an analysis of the creation of meaning in response to the artwork becomes the object of study. But this shifting of the object of analysis raises a question: How can a reception study be certain of the validity of interpretations of this new object of study? Responding to the reception theorists in literary studies (a trend preceding its development in film studies and one whose key proponents influenced Staiger's work—see the bibliography below) is Dominick La Capra with his stunning book *Madame Bovary on Trial*, a work imbued with the dialogue between artworks and their reception. La



Staiger's *Blockbuster TV* analyzes the phenomenon of unusually popular television sit-coms within the context of U.S. entertainment media.



Controversies surrounding *All in the Family* illustrate how public commentary stimulated interest in the show.

Capra articulates the above paradox with cunning table-turning precision:

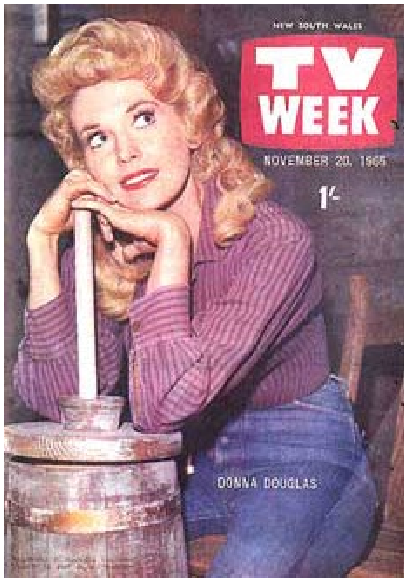
> In elaborating the conditions of possibility that prefigure a given range of interpretations, [a reception study] specifies the shared assumptions that may underlie divergent conclusions… But it should, I think, be supplemented and contested by attempts at critical reading that actively enter the lists of interpretations with all the risks and the political implications this mode of argument entails. The danger [of reception studies] is the confinement of critical inquiry to metacriticism that politically and socially neutralizes itself by placing the analyst in a deceptive position above the conflict of interpretations. (9)

In the particular case of film studies, it seems to me that Staiger has only altered her focus to another mode of interpretation by literally moving from film analysis to literary analysis. In the end, she is really performing a kind of literary analysis of discourse, a literary analysis of film criticism and other modes of reception. I can see how this shift would be tempting to academics.

Film analysis has raised many difficult questions. Many of the theoretical models that dominated early film studies (1970s) have been questioned if not discarded. Analyzing the texts (essays, journalism, press releases) circulating around a film allows an academic to employ traditional (and therefore comfortable) tools and approaches from literary criticism and rhetoric, fields with established, "reliable" methods.

Nonetheless, Staiger's approach remains valuable and powerful. In contrast to the dogmatic "High Theory" that once dominated literary and film theory in the 1970s/1980s, Staiger's studies prove liberating and refreshing; they open up scholarship to the world outside the texts and embrace a more expansive view of film culture, thereby embodying the inter-disciplinary spirit filtering through and enlivening contemporary academic culture.

The Beverly Hillbillies—Staiger links the controversy about the show's "hayseed wholesomeness" to early 1960s critiques of television as a "vast wasteland."



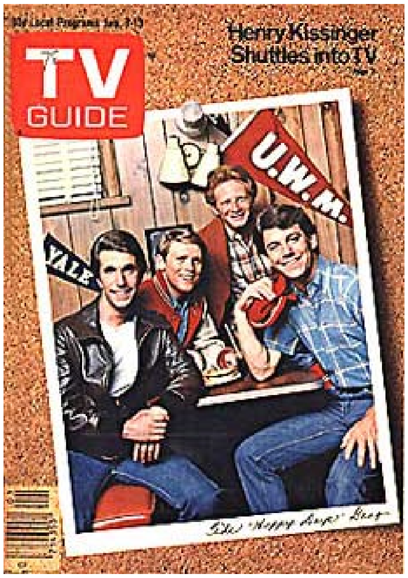
The Beverly Hillbillies is one of four televisions shows that met the criteria of blockbuster status.

But reception study does not simply replace formal analysis of texts. (Perhaps I am also misreading Staiger's attack on formalism. She may allow for a greater degree of formal analysis than indicated in my brief overview.) Furthermore, her attack on formalism is unrelated to the argument for her overall approach. We can agree with her methodology and approach for studying artistic "events" (how artworks are received) while still employing certain other modes of interpretation (from neo-formalist analysis to feminist analysis) to approach the artworks themselves.

Close examination of the reception surrounding certain artworks can help bolster certain interpretations: Did audiences truly struggle with certain radical aesthetic techniques? Was a film truly "subversive?" If so, where is the evidence of subversion? Such questions force us as critics and scholars to examine our claims and how we justify them. If our conclusions are only based solely on the text vis-à-vis some obscure theory, then what exactly is being "proven" or "demonstrated" about the text? Reception study at least raises material-historical questions and forces us to question hermetic approaches to art, approaches that seem to only work within their own interpretative vacuum.

Indeed, Staiger's *Blockbuster TV* artfully balances formal analysis, inflected with and informed by various theoretical perspectives, of four different sit-coms with an examination of their reception. *Blockbuster TV* seeks to explain the phenomenon of unusually popular television sit-coms within the contexts of American entertainment media. Staiger's efforts in this regard rely on formal analysis of the television shows, examination of the fluctuations of Nielson ratings, and media reactions to the shows. In fact, this latter component of the book provides one of the more interesting strains running through Staiger's study, a factor accounting for, in part, the various shows' growth and their role in broadening and even focusing their audiences.

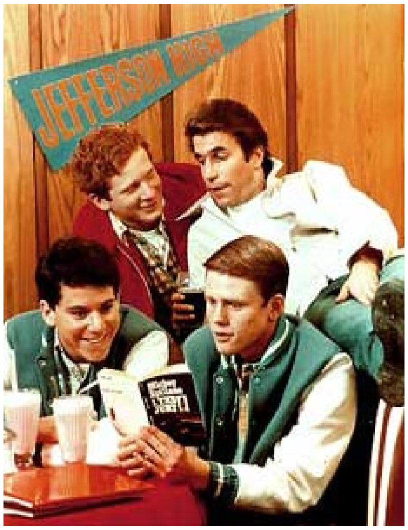
Media coverage of the shows, whether through public commentary, journalism, letters-to-the-editor, and opinion pieces, represent what Staiger calls "surrogate consumers." She demonstrates how journalists and public discussion of the shows



Happy Days' producers made decisions about future programs in the series in response to audience feedback. By analyzing this process, Staiger links reception, formal analysis, and industrial practice.

stimulated surges in their ratings. Thus, Dan Quayle's notorious mealy-mouthed critique of *Murphy Brown* as a show promoting a single mother as a role model marked him as a surrogate consumer, drawing attention, and viewers, to the show.

In fact, Staiger's definition of blockbuster television shows is yoked to peculiar audience ratings, a fact that seemingly registers the need for some sort of reception analysis. Blockbuster television shows constitute shows that rate significantly higher than those of their nearest competitors and maintain these ratings for over a year. Surprisingly, only four shows met such criteria: *The Beverly Hillbillies* [!], *All in the Family, Happy Days*, and *The Cosby Show*. Staiger manages to navigate her multiperspectival approach, which jumps from industry reports, Nielson ratings, demographic analysis, producer's commentary and production practices, mainstream and alternative journalism, formal analysis of the shows, and analysis of various historical contexts, with grace and dexterity.



Happy Days' producers restructured the show around Fonzie and Richie.

Despite an overwhelming amount of material, Staiger skillfully hones it down to a lucid presentation and clearly articulated argument, pared further down to crisp sentences and spiced with a tasty absence of jargon. For example, Staiger's discussion of *The Beverly Hillbillies* examines questions of class, nostalgia, high and low culture (in both the content of the show and in journalistic responses to the show), and the public debates surrounding the institution of television in the early 1960s (the notorious "vast wasteland" debates), as well as industry strategies relating to the show. *Blockbuster TV* offers a breezy read, clocking in at barely over 170 pages (particularly if one channel-surfs over a chunk of lengthy, awkwardly formatted charts, rather carelessly inserted in an early section of the book).

A good example of Staiger's deft demonstration of

Local Programs May 22-28
TV GUIDE
25¢
'Equal Time': Who Needs It—and Why
Cindy Williams and Penny Marshall of 'Laverne & Shirley'

Laverne and Shirley ran in prime time from 1976-1983. They had been friends of the Fonz on *Happy Days* and the show first aired on Wednesday nights after *Happy Days*, jumping to the top of the charts.

"Surrogate consumers" (TV critics and journalists) recognized class issues in *Laverne and Shirley*.

the interaction between formal structure and audiences can be gleaned from her analysis of the changes in sit-com's minor characters. In the cases of *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley* producers tinkered or reworked the show by altering the role and personalities of various characters and such retooling subsequently escalated the shows' ratings. In fact, minor characters, as formal elements of these texts (sit-coms), allow for multivalent responses to the shows (as Staiger demonstrates in an examination of their reception). The minor characters allow for various modes by which different audience members relate to the shows, thereby potentially broadening the appeal of the shows. Here formal analysis dialogues with reception analysis as a strong explanation for the appeal of sit-coms in general.

Minor characters, a key formal element in most sit-coms, allowed producers to respond to audience feedback and tweak their creations, calibrating the shows to the Nielson barometer. Thus, while major characters lent the shows stability, *All in the Family*'s Edith became less of a dingbat over the years and *The Cosby Show*'s Huxtable children changed with every season. Minor characters, then, as Staiger demonstrates, represents a formal trait exploiting the polysemic dimension characterizing all texts, exploiting the fact that different audiences consume texts from their own perspectives and that a text engages with multivalent responses.

Given the nature of our contemporary media landscape—Internet, Tivo, cable, satellite, VCRs, the VHS (and, now, the explosive DVD) rental market —Staiger notes that the era of blockbuster television has effectively waned. However, given the *conglomerate* nature of the contemporary media industry, the vertical-horizontal integration of companies like Time—Warner—AOL, it would interesting to study how corporations can control and exploit the kind of buzz surrounding television shows (just how linked are these "surrogate" consumers?).In fact, it is the kind of buzz Staiger treats as autonomous responses on the part of journalists and audiences.

Some critics have complained that Staiger's reception studies mainly focus on journalists as

Public discourse surrounding *The Cosby Show* questioned the show's realism and its usefulness in addressing contemporary race problems.

The Cosby Show—Minor characters demonstrate fiction's multivalent interpretations. Producers exploit a character's potential multiple readings to broaden a show's audiences.

audience members noting that these media professionals fail to accurately gauge the responses of mass audiences. These wider audiences, admittedly, do not constitute Staiger's field of study; she herself acknowledges film and television critics as a different species of audience, even if they often help to focus the reception of the media texts for wider audiences.

Annette Kuhn's *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger* addresses this limitation. Staiger, in fact, provides something of an inaugural epigram on the book's frontispiece, declaring Kuhn's work,

> An exceptional example of the value of ethnohistory and psychological theory combined with speculation about the meanings of cinema in lives.

Kuhn sets out to explore the shadowy and ephemeral phenomenon of how we experience cinema; specifically, Kuhn's book seeks to conjure the experience of British filmgoers in the 1930s, a period in which their attendance per capita ranked highest in the world. Her analysis reveals how films engaged with other aspects of their daily lives: school, work, leisure, friendships and courtships. In other words, like most film scholars, Kuhn is interested in examining how films impact spectators.

Yet, unlike most film scholars, Kuhn takes an unusual approach to answering this question about film spectators: she asks the viewers. The main spine of this book stems from a comprehensive series of interviews with subjects recalling their experiences of 1930s cinemagoing. You feel the breath of life in these spectators, a rarity in film studies, thanks to the painstaking work contacting the interview subjects and recording and tabulating their testimony.

Moreover, Kuhn treats these interviews not only as data but also as material for interpretation. To capture the milieu of British cinemagoing in the 1930s Kuhn practices a kind of methodological triangulation, angling historical, ethnographic, and formalist prisms to conjure composite images of the era. The results can be interesting, and surprisingly charming, as subjects recall the randy innocence of cinema dates and relationships. Kuhn uses her subject's memories to explore the work of cultural memory as force sharing and shaping audiences.

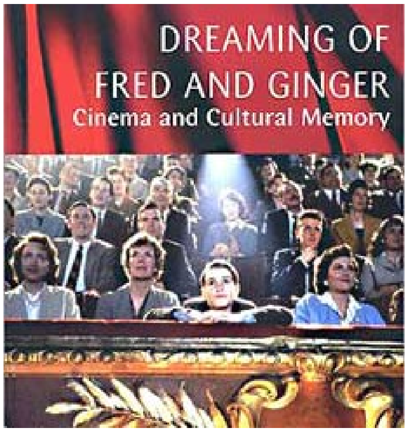
A chapter relying on subject's memories of horror films relays some amusing anecdotes of children hiding under theater seats. Yet Kuhn frequently interrupts their testimony to place their statements within a wider historical context, drawing on both psychological theory and sure-footed historical work, relating her subject's experiences to political discourse surrounding the British authorities concern over film's impact on children.

Ranging through her subjects' personal testimony, Kuhn is able to cover a wide range of ground on this era. For example, some of her interview subjects reveal that as children they were frequently accompanied to the cinema by their maids, perhaps revealing that cinema remained rather déclassé in 1930s British culture. An extended chapter—a tour de force of theoretical footwork—analyzes a sequence from *Top Hat* in relation to numerous accounts of Astaire-Rogers pictures by some of the subjects, suggesting

> The characteristic organization of spaces in the integrated musical proposes particular modes of spectatorial engagement is endorsed by 1930s cinemagoers' recollections of their own responses to Astaire-Rogers films during the act of spectatorship. (182)

By allowing interviewees to testify to a wide range of experiences, Kuhn opens up the notion of spectating as an activity ranging beyond a purely visual experience. Instead we hear reports on the experience of entering the theater space, the sounds, the smells, and the sensation of an embodied audience. Kuhn analyzes memories of the theaters themselves and the topography

Denise Cosby, played by Lisa Bonet—The Huxtable children changed in characterization almost every season.



Annette Kuhn's new book seeks to conjure British filmgoers' experience in the 1930s, a period in which their attendance per capita ranked highest in the world.

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Top Hat*—Of his 1930s filmgoing, a British spectator recalls: “After you’d watched Fred Astaire and Ginger, you wanted to go to’t palais and you thought you could do eh, you could twirl about. You couldn’t. [Laughs]”

Top Hat—With Proustian reverie, a British woman fondly recalls her experience of the slippage between the screen and the audience as she “danced with Fred Astaire while Ginger Rogers watched.”

surrounding them, the neighborhoods and the other patrons.

At times, the book feels rather awkward, as when strains of old-school Althusserian-Lacanian phrasing juts up rather clumsily (and rudely) against the common-sense testimony of an interview subject. Another time, Kuhn’s discussion of the Orientalist strain running through 1930s horror films fails to register in any way with the interviews in that chapter. Yet despite these minor missteps, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger* should inspire future scholar’s footsteps down this arena. A useful appendix describes Kuhn’s methods in locating subjects, the general format of the questionnaires, the general practice governing the interviews, statistics drawn from the pool of interviews, as well as sources cited and a discussion of the theoretical approaches guiding aspects of the book.

The introduction to Kuhn’s book offers a very stimulating and diplomatic survey of the limitations of traditional text-centered analysis, while surveying the important questions and models offered by the burgeoning field of reception studies, as well as the influential work in ethnography —crucial to Kuhn’s own book—by Clifford Geertz and James Clifford. Taken together, the three books discussed above suggest the rich material to be mined by examining films in relation to their reception. Reception study obliges scholars to maintain a certain material credibility in their efforts to explain and/or understand films, rooting their claims in suggestive or illustrative testimony from a variety of historical-material documents.

The archives are waiting.

Continued: Critical bibliography of reception study theory in literature and film

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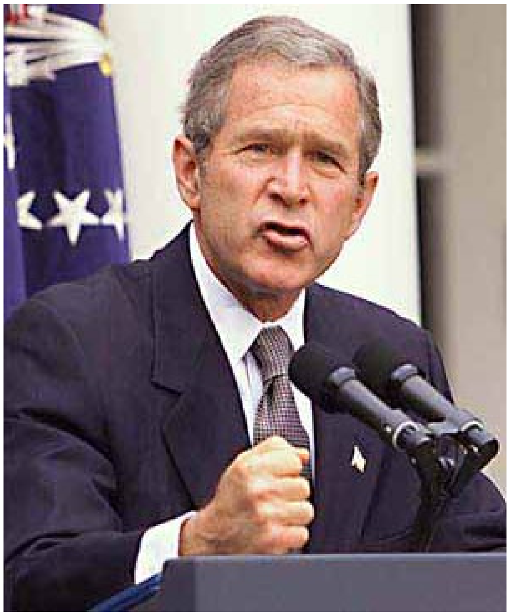
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A road map for America

by Anandam P. Kavoori



[Editors' note: Jump Cut contributor Anandam Kavoori here provides a creative look at television images of the Gulf War, as seen from an immigrant's perspective. We present three selections of his poetry from his book length cycle of poems, *A Road-Map for America*.]

The President's Face

My mother
says on the long-distance call from Delhi
"Its his face," she says
"It mocks us
sneering your country in our face"

DIRECTO
WASHINGTON
considera "improvável" que o Iraque use armas químicas para re

My friend's brother
on the long-distance call from Cairo
starts to shout
when he sees the President's face

"Its not personal," we say
"Its ideological"
they shout back:
"No, its personal
he mocks us frame by frame
every night
smearing your country in our face"

Continued: "The Looter"

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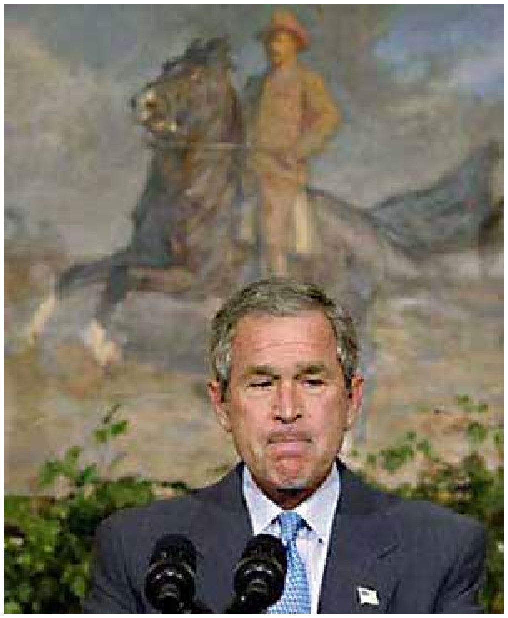

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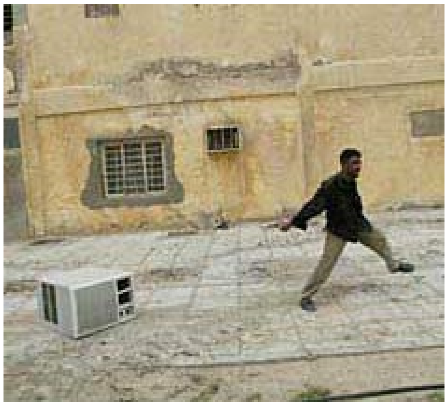
The looter



Carefully
I take my home
and re-make it in your vision
I have watched closely
how to vacuum and
use a washer-dryer
to delicately balance
my deceit with a surfeit of need

In Arabic
the sign says:
“looting is sinful”
it does not say
do not fill washer-dryers
with buckets of water
turning on the shanty-town’s
low-watt line
to watch the clothes tumble-dry

Continued: Abraham in overtime

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Abraham in overtime

Born in Ur of Chaldees
never returning
burying
the faith of idolaters
the original Sin
our three fathers
Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael
*
Cat Stevens
plays his reprieve
the head touched low
the body cool
suffused
with love
beyond minarets
Yusuf, he says
feel me
run through your
divine supplication
you float
surmising nothing
but my word
the cords hum
from here to eternity
with the one
the only
the original

*
Abraham is buried
at the age of 175
at Beersheba, Abraham took Isaac
Sarah's Love
to hold near the pyre
and raised to cleave
but at the buzzer
a reprieve at Temple Mount
in time
a ram's death
and life for our fathers three
Muhammad, Jesus, the other

photocredits

*
Charlatan
Heston
cold dead hands and more
an Abraham complex?
he surrounds himself
with memorabilia:
a Moses robe
a bottle of single malts
stone hands dug out from Iraq
or perhaps archived in the Geniza
from Hebron
stones for his pebble path
from Haran
mud for a wall motif
“I am” he says in a lucid moment
“a Canannaite, a merchant
I crossed the desert
In Shechem, Nablus
I ignored the PLO
at the well where I once stood
behind a camera mount
was a child, bandaged
I asked for his gun”
*
In his name
kill three faiths
father to all, Abraham
in the remains of his house at Ur
you can find an archeological dig
deeper still (if you dig)
three-fold love
Sumerian literature, arithmetic, language
and an arcane reference
to many personal Gods
and to Sin, the Moon-God
The young man, Abram,
not yet Abraham
would posses rare energy
as he whipped the donkey
around the date palms
today, we would say
he had the moves
setting up the play
for a single frame
the original one
our big word:

MONOTHESIM

*

Osama Bin-Laden
crazynot like a fox
dares not say
what he thinks:
“Muhammad-Am-I”
instead he abuses
the original father
and uses his name
in steady monotone
in poetry
a sotto voice
a faded face
his millions
feeding his penury
the soft focus video
the AlJazeera feed
getting without return
a dividend
in stockpiled deaths
in body shaped arsenal
in the BOLD typeface
SUICIDE BOMBERS

*

In Haran, Turkey
Abraham found
a clamorous community
Amorites, Hurrians
mutli-cultures
an early warning?
No!
good times
he traded wool for wheat
had a large flock, a following
King Nimrod,
quite the spoiler
tried assassination (it didn’t work)
for here, in Heron
the great nation
indivisible
under God
was born

*

Misguided missions
every decade
born again Bush
one and two
“It’s easy,” said the Taxi Cab driver
in New York, holy ground
“A Bush in the White House

means (once again)
the economy's down
and we are getting ready for war"
*
In overtime
we need you
the one father
Abram, Abraham, Ibrahim
please understand
our true supplication
we are the multi-cultural
in one
we are tired
of madness
Please
step back
across the line
take a good look
take the game over
make the shot

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word
Unruly consumption

by the editors

Television images from Baghdad and other cities in Iraq showed people, mostly young men, but also older adults and children, carrying, dragging, carting away items: chairs, refrigerators, lighting fixtures, bathtubs, air conditioners, etc. — taking from their (supposedly) despised government and its leaders. The reports continued — looting and even destroying a museum of antiquities, taking everything movable from hospitals. Soon after, some other images appear — local neighborhoods erecting roadblocks to stem the flow of looters with armed men patrolling the streets around their homes, trying to keep outsiders from entering and leaving with stolen goods.

When taking Baghdad, the U.S. government and army wanted television images showing the Iraqi people's jubilation at liberation but were not getting any good footage. U. S. troops suddenly came out to help topple statues of Saddam Hussein, producing photo opportunities for the embedded news cameras. At that time, the Bush administration was glad to get the public "joy" of looting and the quaint local custom of throwing shoes and sandals at fallen statues. Presidential press secretary Ari Fleisher told the press, "Looting is a reaction to oppression."

But looting (the mob) has its own rhythm and gender — that of young men. Shortly after these "jubilant Iraqi" images served their use, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld complained about media images showing mostly looting. Embedded journalism became a burden to the government when the reporters no longer depicted the romance of traveling with the troops and those same journalists were going around an urban center looking for stories. The images of looters became anxiety producing, connoting now a sense of "lawlessness." After all, fear of the mob goes back to peasant revolts and the the French Revolution, and it continues in today's anxieties about grassroots political demonstrations, such as the WTO protests.

Clearly looting is a form of consumption. And the U.S. promotes consumption. But in Iraq it got out of hand and moved on to destruction and vandalism. Lenin described revolution as the "festival of the oppressed." But he was talking about a mass uprising, overthrowing a repressive regime through the efforts of large numbers of the population, and the resulting celebration was about the power of the people themselves. Such images are seen in Eisenstein's *October*, a film which itself was based in the annual re-enactment of the historical event of the Soviet Revolution.

The problem with fixing the meaning of Baghdad's "reappropriation" events stems from fear about the breakdown of civil society. Inner city uprisings must be deplored, stopped, put down because they attack property rights and the established order. When a body politic is out of control, disorder threatens power. But U.S. troops entered Baghdad to overthrow a government the administration had labeled bad, so disorder was....good? Theft was good? Jay Leno ran a TV commercial parody on the *Tonight Show* showing a "Crazy Abdul," against a background of Baghdad looters; he was telling everyone to come on down to his store where you could get real "steals" on furniture and appliances.

Is there such a thing as too much consumption? You'd find it hard to conclude that from U.S. culture, with bigger and bigger SUV's and supersized fast food meals. But our culture and especially our leaders seem to find a lot wrong with "too much" consumption for Others. After all, Iraq had to be invaded because supposedly it had weapons of MASS destruction.

Clearly, on any reasonable reflection, weapons and Saddam Hussein's behavior had little to do with it. When Saddam used deadly chemical warfare with Iran, that tactic was supported by the U.S. When he used them on his own Kurdish population near the Turkish border after the first Gulf War, there was no call for intervention by the U.S. administration. But this current go-it-alone invasion has another rationale — to get strategic access to Iraq's oil. Coincidentally, the war also cancelled out all those contracts Saddam had with Russia and France.

When we consider why the U.S. needs this strategic control of petroleum reserves, it's to fuel those SUVs and all the other wasteful energy consumption in the U.S. For the rest of the world watching, a teenage boy carrying an air conditioner out of a Baghdad police station makes sense, while suburbanite driving to the mall in a Lincoln Navigator to pick up a big box of Pampers disposable diapers seems excessive. Unruly consumption doesn't look the same everywhere or to everybody in the same way.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Links

Using the Internet for contingent faculty organizing

by John Hess

I am an organizer. I work for the California Faculty Association which is the union and bargaining agent for all the faculty in the huge California State University system (CSU). The CSU has 23 campuses, about 23,000 faculty and nearly 450,000 students. The CSU is separate from California's University of California system that includes UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz. The CSU includes San Francisco State, San Jose State, LA State, San Diego State, Fresno State, and Sonoma State. The CSU offers mostly undergraduate education plus some important professional masters degrees in area like education, nursing, engineering, social work, etc.

I am an organizer. In one part of my job I work closely with the CFA Lecturers' Council. Lecturers, full and part time, have term appointments that are contingent on enrollment, budgeting, and other factors. They are now nearly 60% of the system's faculty. In the last three or so years, the Lecturers' Council has become deeply involved in the international movement of contingent faculty. I use the Internet to stay in touch with various individuals, groups, and organizations. A large network of discussion lists and websites has grown up around the movement and has become an important organizing medium locally, nationally, and internationally.

It is not uncommon for contingent faculty to find out about activists or activities on their own campus by reading about it on a website on the other side of the country or in Canada. The most difficult part of organizing contingent faculty has always been finding them. They are usually isolated from each other, distant from their departments, marginalized by the university, which counts on their isolation to keep them from organizing. The Internet has become one way to overcome this isolation. This little resource study is for anyone interested in the how the

Internet can work as an organizing tool or with an interest in this issue, but it is particularly meant to help contingent faculty find their way to activists on their campus and also to encourage them to become active themselves.To begin with CFA has its own website.
http://www.calfac.org/lecturers.html

Of particular interest is the Lecturers Handbook which gives some history of CFA and its work with lecturers. Most importantly, it sets out the rights that lecturers have won in our system:
http://www.calfac.org/handbook.html

We have been greatly influenced in our work by the community college part time faculty activists. In the mid-1990s, they formed an organization, the California Part time Faculty Association (CPFA) to lobby all the unions, senates and other organizations involved in the community colleges on behalf of the part time faculty. They have done a tremendous lobbying job. Their organizing skills, thoughtful development of issues and, perhaps mostly, their wonderful irreverence have been a major inspiration to CFA Lecturers.
http://www.cpfa.org/index.html

The major intellectual center for the contingent faculty movement has been the Association of American University Professors. This page and its links will give a good sense of what is going on in this movement and collects AAUP's numerous statements on contingent faculty:
http://www.aaup.org/Issues/part-time/index.htm

The central document of this movement is an article by Rich Moser of the AAUP: "The New Academic Labor System, Corporatization
And The Renewal of Academic Citizenship"(6/01):
http://www.aaup.org/Issues/part-time/cewmose.htm

The most important non- or quasi-organization for this movement is COCAL (The Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor). It is more than anything an Internet organization, that is, it exits mostly as Internet/email connections between various activists in the US and Canada. I am telling a little of its history to give a sense of how much this movement has grown in less than a decade.

In December 1996, the first National Congress of Adjunct, Part-time, Graduate Teaching Assistants and Non-Tenure Track Faculty was held in Washington, D.C. Concurrently, the Graduate Student Caucus of the Modern Language Association held a panel on "Making the MLA More Proactive" in part-time faculty issues.
In April 1998, the 2nd Annual National Congress was held at the

CUNY Grad Center in New York City. The group renamed itself "The Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL)," and elected its first real steering committee.

The 3rd Annual conference was be held the following year in Boston (April, 1999), hosted by activists from the University of, Massachusetts, Boston (UMB) Part-time Faculty Committee of the Faculty-Staff Union (FSU). For a moment COCAL came to rest in Boston as Boston COCAL.

Leaders of the California Part-time Faculty Association (CPFA), linked with their East coast colleagues through Internet list serves and e-mail, hosted COCAL IV, the first West Coast National Conference on Contingent Academic Labor, in January, 2001, in San Jose. COCAL –Chicago was formed later that year: http://www.chicagococal.org/

> Our primary purpose at this time is to develop strategies for improving the status, pay and treatment of contingent academic labor in Chicago and its suburbs and to support efforts by other groups in public and private universities and colleges to do the same.

COCAL V took place at Concordia University (CU) in Montreal. The CU Part-time Association successfully hosted the conference in Montreal. This was the biggest COCAL meeting yet and included a march against the host university. It was there that California attendees suggested founding COCAL–California. CFA played a helpful role in its formation in fall, 2002. It is a coalition of organizations representing contingent faculty in the UCs, the CSUs, and the community colleges. We put on a large conference on the UC Berkeley campus in May, 2003, to bring together activists from the UC system, the CSU, and the community colleges.
http://www.cocal-ca.org/

Finally, COCAL sponsors the most important listserv where contingent faculty issues are discussed. To subscribe to the COCAL listserv, send an e-mail to:
<adj-l-request@listserv.gc.cuny.edu>.

Put the following command in the body of the message (not the subject line):
SUBSCRIBE ADJ-L firstname lastname <emailaddress>.

Another important Internet organization is the North American Alliance for Fair Employment, an informational and solidarity network of unions and that links contingent workers from all sectors of the economy.
http://www.fairjobs.org

NAFFE is an alliance of a great range of organizations who deal with temporary workers in a variety of fields.

> We stand for equal treatment (pay, benefits and protections under the law) regardless of employment status. Our work is part of the broader fight to ensure that working people have the right and opportunity to provide for themselves, their families and their communities.

NAFFE is important because it makes the connections amongst all forms of temporary workers, whether cleaning offices or teaching in universities .Currently, all these people and organizations are working on Campus Equity Week (October 27-31, 2003). It will be a week of protest against contingent working conditions and also a week of celebration of the contributions that contingent faculty make to their students and their universities.
http://www.cewaction.org/

In many ways it could be said that across the country, and in Canada too, it is the contingent faculty who are fighting to save higher education, while most of the tenured and tenure track faculty seem oblivious to the ever accelerating corporatization of higher education, with its attendant undermining of faculty working conditions (more for less) and academic freedom.

The AAUP has also published considerable information about Campus Equity Week along with practical ways to get involved.: http://www.aaup.org/Issues/part-time/cewpage.htm. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which boasts on its website that it represents more contingent faculty than any other union, has a lot of information about what its own locals are doing, a booklet on good standards and practices that ought to be used, and an endorsement of CEW and an invitation to its members to get involved.
http://www.aft.org/higher_ed/parttime/index.html

The other major education union, the National Education Association (http://www.nea.org/) with which CFA is affiliated, boasts that it represents more higher education teachers than any other union. However, from its website's home page it is nearly impossible to gather that NEA represents any contingent faculty. Only by accessing "Publications and Multimedia" on the sidebar navigation tool and then going to "Higher Education Advocate," an NEA magazine for higher education members, and then using the search tool to find "contingent faculty," will you find out that NEA has sponsored several of the COCAL meetings and supports CEW. Looking under higher education policies, I was able to find one on contingent faculty:
http://www.nea.org/he/policy12.html

On the more academic side, various of the disciplinary organizations have done various sorts of research, hand wringing, and moralizing about the situation of contingent academic labor, especially as it affects their own graduate students. An example is the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) (established in 1997) by disciplinary associations in the humanities and social sciences. CAW states it purposes as:

- to collect and disseminate information on the use of part-time and contingent faculty members and its implications for students, parents, faculty members, and institutions;
- to articulate and clarify differences in the extent and consequences of changes in the faculty within and among the various academic disciplines and fields of study;
- to evaluate the consequences of these developments for achieving and maintaining quality higher education;
- to evaluate both short-term and long-term consequences for society and the public good of changes in the academic workforce;
- to identify and promote strategies for solving the problems created by inappropriate use of part-time, adjunct, and similar faculty appointments;
- to strengthen teaching and scholarship.

In fall 1999, CAW commissioned a survey of staffing in higher education:

> Seven groups—anthropology, cinema studies, folklore, linguistics, English, foreign languages, and philology—surveyed all departments in their fields. Three other groups—history, philosophy, and freestanding composition programs—surveyed a sample of departments. The surveys asked departments about who is teaching their classes and what the departments provide their part-time and adjunct faculty members in the way of support, benefits, and salaries.

CAW has done some valuable research on this issue and its impact on young faculty and students, but they seem unable to imagine, much less recommend any sort of collective action. Without that, it's mostly hand wringing. The results of the survey may be found at <www.theaha.org/caw/>.
One can reach CAW via email at CAW@mla.org.

Finally, you will find "A Review of Web Sites for Contingent Faculty," by James C. McDonald of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette:
http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/8.1/reviews/mcdonald/

By following links on the sites described here, you will find a wealth of information and further links. Email and the Internet are invaluable tools for reaching out to and organizing contingent faculty. It also helps the organizers stay informed, work together over great distances, share and develop ideas together. The dilemma we face, however, is that face to face conversation is by far the best way to organize, create relations with people and get them involved. Yet, the difficulty of doing that on college and university campuses is very great. Reaching most contingent faculty that way is nearly impossible and certainly very time consuming. That, of course, has always been true. The Internet and email have greatly improved our ability to organize people in an effort to bring about change.

If you are faculty at all, please join us for Campus Equity Week.

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